



Rhetorics of Fantasy

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An application of the ideas expressed in this book can be found in my *Diana Wynne Jones: Children's Literature and the Fantastic Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Introduction

This book is not about defining fantasy. The debate over definition is now long-standing, and a consensus has emerged, accepting as a viable "fuzzy set," a range of critical definitions of fantasy. It is now rare to find scholars who choose among Kathryn Hume, W. R. Irwin, Rosemary Jackson, or Tzvetan Todorov: it is much more likely they will pick and choose among these and other "definers" of the field according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested.

I want to reach out for an understanding of the *construction* of the genre; specifically, I wish to consider its language and rhetoric, in order to provide critical tools for further analysis. During the research for this book I became aware that while there are many single author or single text studies in genre fantasy criticism, there is relatively little comparative criticism beyond the study of metaphorical and thematic elements. There is almost nothing dealing with the *language* of the fantastic that goes beyond aesthetic preference.¹ My contention is that if we do not have a critical tool that allows us to colate texts in any yielding way (note that I do *not* insist on "meaningful"), we cannot engage in the comparative research that illuminates a genre.

I believe that the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that it is a fiction of consensual construction of belief. This expectation is historical, subject to historical change, and is not unique to fantasy. Wayne C. Booth has written that "for experienced readers a sonnet begun calls for a sonnet concluded; an elegy begun in blank verse calls for an elegy completed in blank verse" (*Fiction* 12). This dialectic is conditioned by the very real genre expectations circling around certain identifiable rhetorical techniques that I will be describing. Intrinsic to my argument is that a fantasy succeeds when the literary techniques employed are most appropriate to the reader expectations of that category of fantasy. Understanding the broad brushstrokes of plot or the decoration of device is less fundamental to comprehending the genre; all of these may be tweaked or subverted while still remaining firmly within the reader's expectation of the text.

I came to this project as a science fiction critic, and that perspective has shaped the way I understand the structures and rhetorics of fantasy. Crucially, it led me to focus on an issue that both W. R. Irwin and Brian Attebery (*Attebery, Fantasy Tradition*) have raised: the way in which a text becomes fantasy or, alternatively, the way the fantastic enters the text and the reader's relationship to this.²

In science fiction, how the reader is brought into the speculative world influences the ways in which that world can be described. The incredible invention story rapidly gives way to the completed future, because the incredible invention permits only one level of emotional response, that of ritualized amazement or ritualized horror. In contrast, as Robert A. Heinlein argued and practiced, the completed future—the enclosed world or pocket universe—permits the author to elicit increasingly complex responses but demands much more sophisticated narrative techniques. But the question remains, what is the precise reader relationship to these futures? There is a clear difference between the imaginary society, which we enter riding on the shoulder of the otherworldly visitor (a construct most common to utopian fiction),³ and the society we encounter as a hidden observer for whom no allowances are made: the first demands—and usually offers—explanations; the second requires the reader to unpack the intertext. The consequences of these reader relationships for science fiction have been explored by John Clute, Samuel R. Delany, John Huntington, Edward James, and Brian Stableford, among others. My approach therefore is not new. I am building on work already done, but work that has primarily been done for science fiction. My intention is to turn the same critical gaze on fantasy, to take up Roger Schlobin's challenge, implicit in his claim that the "key to the fantastic is how its universes work, which is sometimes where they are, but is always why and how they are" (*"Rituals"* 161). Attebery argues that most fantasy writers create clearly defined frames: "Narrative devices that establish a relationship between the fantasy world and our own while at the same time separating the two" (*Strategies* 66)—which is of course what my book is about: how these strategies work and their impact.

In this book I argue that there are essentially four categories within the fantastic: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. These categories are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world. In the portal-quest we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape. Each category

has as profound an influence on the rhetorical structures of the fantastic as does its *taproot* text or genre. Each category is a mode susceptible to the quadripartite template or grammar—wrongness, thinning, recognition, and healing/return—that John Clute suggests in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (338–339).⁴ Each mode places its emphasis on a different note within this four-note bar; within the mode, consistencies exist in the use of these templates that demonstrate coherence in the categories.

The construction of these groups strongly suggests a taxonomy and it would be disingenuous of me to attempt to fudge this issue. Taxonomy, however needs to be understood as a tool, not as an end in itself, and it needs to be understood in the modern context that taxonomical practices are increasingly polysemic and multiplex, generated by acknowledged questions and capable of existence alongside other configurations. It is not my intention here to argue that there is only one possible taxonomic understanding of the genre. The purpose of the book is not to offer a classification *per se* but to consider the genre in ways that open up new questions. It is a tool kit, not a color chart.

If the taxonomy I suggest is to succeed as a critical tool kit, it must work across the more commercial definitions of fantasy, as well as the categories of children's and adults' fantasy, dark fantasy, and light and comic fantasy. It must help to explain some of the more anomalous texts: those that find their genre coat of the wrong cut or color, rough to the touch or tight around the sleeves. In essence, my contention is that the failure to grasp the stylistic needs of a particular category of fantasy may undermine the effectiveness of an otherwise interesting idea. Eleanor Cameron wrote that fantasy is "a very special category of literature that compares with fiction as a sonnet compares with poetry. Either you have a sonnet if you have written your poem in a certain way, or you don't if you haven't" (165). To use my own terms, which are outlined below, an *immersive* fantasy told with the voice of *portal* fantasy will feel leaden; a *liminal* fantasy written with the naïveté of the *intrusion* fantasy will feel overcontrived.

Inevitably, there will be texts that appear to cross categories, but these exceptions test the rule: where authors move from one category to another within the text, they invariably assume new techniques; the cadence shifts, and both metaphor and mimetic writing take on different functions to accommodate the new category. This shift is at times inadvertent and at other times subject to the manipulation of more ambitious and skilled writers. Yet while many books move internally from one category to another, very few authors produce a single text that exists simultane-

ously within multiple categories (although as we shall see, immersive fantasy can host an intrusion). These exceptional few will be discussed in chapter 5, and their achievements provide an important caveat for this book: no theory that claims universal applicability is worth a damn. Here I take serious exception with Stanley Fish's argument that "theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict, results that will be immediately compelling to those for whom the theory's assumptions and enabling principles are self-evident. Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that *didn't* work" (68). This statement, however amusing, encapsulates much of what is wrong with current "schools" of literary criticism.⁵ This observation may seem egregious, but it is essential when reading this book to know that its author does not necessarily *believe* in these structures. They are observations, not dictats, and they are powerful only to the degree that they remain arguable.

This book is very much grounded in a love of forms, but form cannot be wholly abstracted from content or ideology. Furthermore, I have come to believe that form may act to constrain ideological possibilities. Consequently consideration is given to interpretation where the issue is *how* a particular mode of writing helps to generate, intensify, or twist meaning. A great deal of this book will consider how particular rhetorics deliberately or unavoidably support ideological positions and in so doing shape character, or affect the construction and narration of story. Generally speaking this is a book about structure, not about meaning.

When I began this book I believed the issue to be taxonomy. Halfway through, I was convinced that I was working within narratology. Later, rhetoric became my principal concern. In the concluding stages I realized I was working within what is described as poetics. Finally, I realized that the most illuminating metaphors came from the world of landscape painting. This book is the result of an extended thought experiment. It is not intended to fix subcategories of genre (as I hope chapter 5 will make clear), or to say, "this is how you do *x* kind of fantasy." It is intended solely in terms of "this is what I observe over a wide range of texts." It is an exercise in almost pure Reason—a rather old-fashioned approach to criticism, I am aware. I have used other critics where I found them helpful, but there is surprisingly little written on the rhetoric or poetics of the fantastic. I am, however, indebted to the work of John Clute and Brian Attebery, whose writings have served as compass poles, and to the "How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy" books and blog discussions of many active fantasy authors. Wherever this text fits, I hope that it provokes more questions than it answers.

A Note on the Selection of Texts

No *system* of selection has been applied to the choice of texts in this book. At best, the selection builds on Attebery's notion of the fuzzy set—the idea that there are core likenesses around which we can construct ever more distant perimeters—but with one significant caveat. I argue here that rather than a single fuzzy set, from which fantasy moves from genre to slipstream, we can actually identify several fuzzy sets, linked together by what John Clute has termed *taproot* texts (*Encyclopedia* 921–922). Inevitably, some forms of fantasy appeal to me more than others and I have yet to find a reader who claims to enjoy all of the kinds I have outlined: to give just one example, readers who like portal-quest fantasies rarely seem to enjoy the liminal fantasies, and vice versa. I have not been able to keep this coloration entirely absent from the text, although where I knew my own tastes might predetermine my analysis, I tackled the problem in part by asking those more enthusiastic for the forms to select my reading. This outside selection is particularly evident in chapter 1 (portal-quest fantasy) and chapter 3 (intrusion fantasy) where all the texts chosen came recommended by friends and members of the International Association of the Fantastic in the Arts online discussion list. In contrast the books selected for chapters 4 and 5 are works I had already read, and that had fascinated me. A consequence is that some writers central to the field do not appear in this book: in each case the omission is entirely because my personal taste does not extend in their direction. For these reasons, and aware that the passive academic voice has a tendency to reinforce reification, I have chosen to retain the first person.

I am not myself always convinced my assignments are appropriate. Some books have been wrangled back and forth between chapters as I have tried to decide in which mode they were written. Dividing between immersive fantasies (which just happened to have intrusions as part of their plot but whose rhetoric emphasized the immersive qualities of the text) and those fantasies set in other worlds (in which intrusion is the source of the fantastic) was not always easy. Whether the choices have been correct or not, the very engagement with them has generated questions about the ways in which the fantastic is written; any disputes as to where I have placed each book will, I hope, generate more.

Finally, where possible—and unless stated otherwise—I have referenced all texts to the first editions. The major exception to this is in chapter 3 where the classic Gothic novels are all referenced to current Penguin Classics for the ease of both author and reader.

This book is constructed as a set of interlocking essays: with the exception of chapter 5 each of the essays stands alone while leaning against the arguments and definitions of the other chapters. The critical questions in each chapter are: How do we get there? How do we meet the fantastic? In what ways does this meeting affect the narrative and rhetorical choices? How does this affect the choice of language and in what way does the choice of language affect the construction of the fantastic and the position of the reader? What ideological consequences emerge from the rhetorical structures? Perhaps the most crucial question is, Where are we asked to stand in relationship to the fantastic? It is important to understand that I am not discussing point of view, or what Gérard Genette labeled *focalization*. Focalization is a matter internal to the story and there is no common choice within any of the categories (although one cannot but notice the extensive use of first person in the liminal fantasy). What I am interested in is the reader's relationship to the framework. Bijoy H. Boruah, in trying to rationalize the empathic emotions of the reader, wrote, "To appreciate fictions is, to some extent, also to fictionalize ourselves" (126), an activity he called "metaphoric participation." His phrase is peculiarly apt for what I am arguing. That "reader position" to which I will keep pointing, while on the one hand a reference to our ideal and implied reader, is also an invitation to construct a fictionalized self who can accept the construction of the rhetoric of a particular fantastic text. But the invitation is not free and open: it is an exercise in which the author continually seeks the upper hand. In his reader's report on this book Brian Attebery wrote, "Characters can be categorized variously as being immersed in, or wandering through, or fighting off invasions of the fantastic; readers, however, can take any or all of these positions at once, since they are constantly mediating between the fantasy world and their own experience" (Reader's report, 2006). Yet what I shall argue here is that the author seeks to control these choices, even while understanding the polysemous and proactive position of the reader. For many authors the task is to anticipate readers' strategies as part of their own poetics. The core rhetorical strategy of fantasy remains the same: fantasy is constructed *with precision* through point of view. Like a perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in "the wrong place," the image/experience will not resolve.

It is almost impossible to deal with each category discretely; thus there

will be constant comparisons between the forms I identify in order to show the differences between their workings and tone.

The Portal-Quest Fantasy

A portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal. The classic portal fantasy is of course *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Crucially, the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not "leak." Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not.⁶

Closest in form to the classic utopian or alien planet story (sometimes, but not always, a first contact tale), portal fantasies require that we learn from a point of entry. They are almost always quest novels and they almost always proceed in a linear fashion with a goal that must be met. Like the computer games they have spawned, they often contain elaborate descriptive elements. Yet while the intrusion fantasy must be unpacked or defeated, the portal fantasy must be navigated. Frequently, portal fantasies become more mysterious, rather than less. The reliance on destiny in so many portal fantasies may reflect the need to create rational explanation of irrational action without destroying this mystery. The language of the portal fantasy is often elaborate, but it is the elaboration of the anthropologist or the Pre-Raphaelite painter, intensely descriptive and exploratory rather than assumptive. It is a rare portal fantasy that achieves the Gothic (although David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* [1920], comes to mind, as does *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [1865]) and when it does, the need to describe and explain remains a driving force behind the narrative and the language used. Most significant, the portal fantasy allows and relies upon both protagonist and reader gaining experience. Where the stock technique of intrusion is to keep surprising the reader, portal fantasies lead us gradually to the point where the protagonist knows his or her world enough to change it and to enter into that world's destiny. One way to envision this technique is that we ride alongside the protagonist, hearing only what she hears, seeing only what she sees; thus our protagonist (even if she is not the narrator) provides us with a guided tour of the landscapes. Diana Wynne Jones's *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996) both mocks this technique and reduces it to its purest form: the travel guide.

When we think of portal fantasies, we commonly assume that the portal is from "our" world to the fantastic, but the portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and negotiation. Much quest fantasy, for all that it builds the full secondary world, fits better with the portal fantasy. Characteristically in quest fantasy the protagonist goes from a mundane life—in

which the fantastic, if she is aware of it, is very distant and unknown (or at least unavailable to the protagonist)—into direct contact with the fantastic, through which she transitions, to the point of negotiation with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm. In chapter 1 I shall trace precisely this process in *The Lord of the Rings*. The discussion in chapter 1 will help to distinguish the creation of a convincing rhetorical secondary world from the techniques of immersive fantasy. In the quest fantasy we see the world through this transitional narrative: despite the assertion that this world has *always* existed, the technique remains identical to that of the portal fantasy and the effect on the language of the text is the same, forcing the author to describe and explain what is seen by the point of view character as she negotiates the world. The result, when done poorly, is didactic, but as I hope to demonstrate, even the most creative writers find it difficult in this form to avoid impressing upon the reader an authoritative interpretation of their world.

The Immersive Fantasy

The immersive fantasy invites us to share not merely a world, but a set of assumptions. At its best, it presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and for the reader: we sit on the protagonist's shoulder and while we have access to his eyes and ears, we are not provided with an explanatory narrative. The immersive fantasy is that which is closest to science fiction; as such, it makes use of an irony of mimesis, which helps to explain why a sufficiently effective immersive fantasy may be indistinguishable from science fiction: once the fantastic becomes assumed, it acquires a scientific cohesion all of its own. In 2000, this problem of genre led to endless debates about the status of both Mary Gentle's *Ash* (2000) and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000). The effectiveness of the immersive fantasy, however depends on an assumption of realism that denies the need for explication.

The immersive fantasy seems to be described in part by what it is not. We do not enter into the immersive fantasy, we are assumed to be of it: our cognitive estrangement is both entire and negated. The immersive fantasy must be sealed; it cannot, within the confines of the story, be questioned. While an intrusion narrative may drive the plot, as in *Perdido Street Station*, the setting is already fantastic so that the intrusion is not in itself the source of the fantastic. Most important is that the fantasy be immersive for the point of view characters: unlike the characters of quest fantasies, which I have argued above are better fitted to the

category of portal fantasy, the point of view characters of an immersive fantasy *must* take for granted the fantastic elements with which they are surrounded; they must exist as integrated with the magical (or fantastic) even if they themselves are not magical; they must be "deeply competent with the world they know" (Clute, *Strokes* 34). As we shall see in chapter 2, successful immersive fantasy consciously negates the sense of wonder in favor of an atmosphere of ennui. M. John Harrison's *The Pastel City* (1971) both achieves this negation and uses this trope to mock our expectations.

The use of the immersive mode can undermine the intentions of an author. One might presume that Laurell K. Hamilton's vampire novels (beginning with *Guilty Pleasures* [1993]) were intended as horror. They contain the requisite actors: the vampire, the vampire hunter, several nasty monsters, and later a werewolf. But the fantastic elements are not in themselves frightening, and they are most definitely not horrific. The potential horror of the Anita Blake novels is subverted by the structures and language native to immersive fantasy: although a horror novel is read with expectation, the immersive fantasy places much of that expectation on contextual difference, rather than the intruding event. Immersion, with its ironic realism, normalizes the horrific and prevents the sense of attrition that Clute identifies as essential to Horror (personal communication). That these novels ended up in chapter 3 (intrusion fantasy) has nothing to do with the accoutrements of the fantastic by which they are usually categorized; their placement arises, rather, from the trajectory of escalation that shapes both the individual books and the series.

Perhaps most interesting is that it is most commonly in the immersive fantasies that one finds oneself in a fantasy world in which no magic occurs. Sometimes this absence is because the magic takes place elsewhere. But there are many immersive fantasy novels that differ from science fiction only in that they are set in apparently archaic worlds that are not connected to ours: in Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946), the fantastic is embedded in the linguistic excesses of the text, or in the interaction between the setting and the protagonists. In the immersive fantasy, the plot may be the least fantastical element.

Intrusion Fantasy

In intrusion fantasy the fantastic is the bringer of chaos. It is the beast in the bottom of the garden, or the elf seeking assistance. It is horror and

amazement. It takes us out of safety without taking us from our place. It is recursive. The intrusion fantasy is not necessarily unpleasant, but it has as its base the assumption that normality is organized, and that when the fantastic retreats the world, while not necessarily unchanged, returns to predictability—at least until the next element of the fantastic intrudes.

Fantasy and “reality” are often kept strictly demarcated: in some fictions, those set apart from the protagonist may not be able to perceive the fantastic even as they experience its effects. These structural characteristics of intrusion fantasy are mimicked by the language we can associate with this form. Because the base level is the normal world, intrusion fantasies maintain stylistic realism and rely heavily on explanation. Because the drive of intrusion fantasy is to be investigated and made transparent, description is intense, and it is assumed that we, the readers, are engaged with the ignorance of the point of view character, usually the protagonist. One consequence of this ignorance is that the language reflects constant amazement. Unlike the portal fantasy, which it otherwise strongly resembles, the protagonists and the reader are never expected to become accustomed to the fantastic.

The required awestruck or skeptical tone is tricky and may contribute to the preference for stylistic realism in order to maintain the contrast between the normal world and the fantastic intrusion. It also may explain the tendency of the intrusion fantasy to continually introduce new protagonists, and to up the ante on the nature or number of the horrors. Horror, amazement, and surprise are difficult to maintain if the protagonist has become accustomed to them. Escalation—of many kinds—is an important element of the rhetoric.

Intrusion fantasy, although usually associated with “real world” fantasy, can be set within the immersive. If such is the case, the same rules apply: there is a clear line between the constructed “normality” and the intrusion. Protagonists know what is normal even if we do not and express this clearly and forcefully; the intrusion must be defeated, and the actors remain acted upon. The innocence of the protagonists, however, is combined with their competence within the immersive fantasy; because their negotiation of their own world is fundamentally interesting to the reader, characters become actors within the immersive fantasy as well acted upon by the intrusion. The technique can be seen in Alexander Irvine’s *A Scattering of Jades* (2002) in which an Aztec god is reintroduced to 1840s New York. Here, the historical city is our fantasy land.

The Liminal Fantasy

The liminal fantasy is perhaps the most interesting because it is so rare. M. John Harrison has spoken of the existence of the transliminal moment, the point where we are invited to cross the threshold into the fantastic, *but choose not to do so*.⁷ The result is that the fantastic leaks back through the portal. One such manifestation can be the leakage of the monster into the narrated world—Philip Pullman uses this motif to create horror in *The Subtle Knife* (1997)—more subtly, however, the portal itself may be the intrusion. Harrison notes this motif in Wells’s “The Door in the Wall” (1906), in which a man is three times tempted by a green door leading to a garden, and three times refuses the portal. While the metaphorical role of the green door may be significant to the critic, here its position as representative of the fantastic is more important. This seemingly ordinary story *feels* like fantasy. We somehow know that it is the fantastic. What I contend is that in this story the fantastic is the temptation framed by the door. The anxiety and the continued maintenance and *irresolution* of the fantastic becomes the locus of the “fantasy.” The liminal moment that maintains the anxiety around this material temptation assists the creation of the tone and mode that we associate with the fantastic: its presence is represented as unnerving, and it is this sense of the unnerving that is at the heart of the category I have termed liminal. I prefer *liminal* to Tzvetan Todorov’s *hesitation* or *uncertainty*, because I think that hesitation is only one strategy employed by these writers. Todorov’s (1973) concern with “the fantastic” as something distinct from fantasy means that his ideas are encompassed within this section but do not describe the whole. Liminal fantasy as discussed here is very clear that magic, or at least the possibility of magic, is part of the consensus reality, a position rather different from, but not in conflict with, Todorov’s more specific interests.

In the liminal fantasy we are given to understand, through cues to the familiar, that this is our world. When the fantastic appears, it *should* be intrusive, disruptive of expectation; instead, while the events themselves might be noteworthy and/or disruptive, their magical origins barely raise an eyebrow. We are disoriented. The enclosed nature of the immersive fantasy is absent: the hints and cues are missing. Yet, as in immersive fantasy, the protagonist demonstrates no surprise. It is the reaction to the fantastic that shapes this category, as well as the context of the fantasy.

The tone of the liminal fantasy could be described as blasé. An excellent example may be found in Joan Aiken’s Armitage family stories, in which the family all remain remarkably calm when unicorns appear on their lawn

("Yes, But Today is Tuesday" [1953]). The tone of Aiken's work is matter-of-fact and casual; unlike James Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden" (1940), it is not trying to trick anyone. The protagonist in M. John Harrison's "I Did It" (2001) spends a great deal of time discussing why he put an axe in his head, and whether it looks good, but neither he, nor anyone else, questions the viability of its presence. While liminal fantasy casualizes the fantastic within the experience of the protagonist, it estranges the reader. The situation is odd, and it is our reaction to oddness that is being exploited. Whereas in the portal fantasy we ride with the protagonist, in the liminal fantasy we sit in the subconscious of the point of view character, quietly screaming, "But something is wrong," a dream on the point of becoming lucid. While the intrusion fantasy is fascinated with the monster, the liminal fantasy wallows in ennui. To cross the portal is to confront the illusion, but confrontation (as we shall see in chapter 1) reduces rather than intensifies the fantastic. The transliminal moment, which brings us up to the liminal point and then refuses to cross the threshold, has much greater potential to generate fear, awe, and confusion—all intensely important emotions in the creation of the fantastic mode.

Liminal fantasy may rely on conscious exaggeration of the mimetic style. Indeed, in defiance of the conventional understanding of the fantastic as straight-faced, the effectiveness of this category may rest with its adoption of the ironic mode. It seems clear that this category is shaped as much by doubts and questions as by assertions. It is perhaps the most interesting, though also the most elusive, of the categories proposed here. The liminal fantasy relies on a number of different techniques, but central to its construction of the Absurd are (1) irony and equivoque, (2) the twisting of the metonymic/metaphorical structures of fantasy, and (3) a construction of a point of balance right at the edge of belief.

This kind of fantasy may be the most demanding of the four categories outlined here and the one that most requires for its effectiveness the understanding and subversion of our expectations of the fantastic. Of all the categories it is the one that depends most on my notion of multiple fuzzy sets. Far from being at the edge of genre, the least fantastical of texts, liminal fantasy is the fuzzy set supported by and between the other modes that I am discussing. Liminal fantasies distill the essence of the fantastic.

The Irregulars

Chapter 5, considering as it does texts that warp and distort the patterns I have observed (and that may well have produced patterns I cannot yet

see), is essential to this book. This book is about rhetorics, not taxonomic phyla. Genre markers (whether tropes or patterns) are useful analytical tools but they are constructions imposed on a literary landscape. The same landscape may be susceptible to quite a different cartography. The books discussed in this chapter may point the way to that other cartography.

I have no category title for the works in chapter 5: "Hybrid forms" would both reify the categories in a way I find uncomfortable and suggest that these texts are "between" things. I am also wary of terminology that implies a link between nonformulaic fantasy and quality. Quality is to be found in every one of the rhetorics I outline and much of this quality has to do with how formulas are exploited. In addition, these texts are, if anything, hyperaware of formula. The texts considered in chapter 5 straddle the forms I have outlined, folding, twisting, and reweaving the material of the fantastic in order to produce texts that depend on our understanding of these forms, yet do something "other." Each of the books in chapter 5 demonstrates the incredible potential that exists in the genre.

The Portal-Quest Fantasy

In both portal and quest fantasies, a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place. Although portal fantasies do not *have* to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are, and the rhetorical position taken by the author/narrator is consistent.

The position of the reader in the quest and portal fantasy is one of companion-audience, tied to the protagonist, and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding (see also Branham, who makes the same connection). This reader position is quite different from the one we shall see in the immersive fantasy: there the implied reader, although dependent on the protagonist's absorption of sight and sounds, is not required to accept his or her narrative. One way to distinguish the two, is that despite the illusion of presence (the tales are usually told in the third person) the listener is represented as if present at the telling of a tale. Although I hesitate to describe the position constructed in the portal-quest fantasy as infantilizing—some of the novels I shall discuss demand significant intellectual commitment—it is perhaps not coincidental that the classic portal tale is more common in children's fantasy than in that ostensibly written for the adult market.

As Clute defines portals (*Encyclopedia* 776), they litter the world of the fantastic, marking the transition between this world and another; from our time to another time; from youth to adulthood. The most familiar and archetypal portal fantasy in the United Kingdom is *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), while in the United States the *Oz* tales are perhaps better known.¹ In both, and crucially, the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not leak. Nonetheless, there are differences in the placement of

the protagonist, and in the role the elements of transition and exploration play. The extent to which the mode of narrative shifts as we traverse the portal from the frame world to the other world influences the degree to which we shall settle into the fantasy world and accept it as both fantasy and as "real." Different authors have handled the transition in different ways, and in the early period of the development of this form of fantasy there was little consensus.

Modern quest and portal fantasies rely upon very similar narrative strategies because each assume the same two movements: transition and exploration. The portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and exploration, and much quest fantasy, for all we might initially assume that it is immersive (that is, fully in and of its world), adopts the structure and rhetorical strategies of the portal fantasy: it denies the taken for granted and positions both protagonist and reader as naive. Characteristically the quest fantasy protagonist goes from a mundane life, in which the fantastic, if she is aware of it, is very distant and unknown (or at least unavailable to the protagonist) to direct contact with the fantastic through which she transitions, exploring the world until she or those around her are knowledgeable enough to negotiate with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm. There is thus little difference between Belgation in David Eddings's *Pawn of Prophecy* (1982), who only discovers his magic when he leaves his village, and Andrew Carr, in Marion Zimmer Bradley's rationalized fantasy² *The Spell Sword* (1974), who discovers his telepathy on the world of Darkover.

Although individuals may cross both ways, the fantastic does not. Such an effect would move the fantasy into the category of *intrusion*, which (as I shall discuss in chapter 3) uses a very different grammar and tone. Very occasionally both categories may occur in the same book, but while immersive fantasies may contain intrusion, it is relatively rare for portal-quest fantasies to do so. One of the few crossovers are the Harry Potter novels, which typically begin as intrusion fantasies—the abrupt arrival of the owls in Privet Drive in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), causing chaos and disturbance—but very rapidly transmute into almost archetypal portal fantasies, reliant on elaborate description and continual new imaginings.

Despite its reputation as a "full secondary world," the most familiar quest fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, follows the structure outlined: Frodo moves from a small, safe, and *understood* world into the wild, unfamiliar world of Middle-Earth. It is *The Silmarillion*, the book told from within the world, about people who know their world, that is

the immersive fantasy. And as *The Lord of the Rings* (1956) contains within it the portal from the Shire into the big wide world, so *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and many of their portal fantasy successors contain the journey and the goal of the quest narratives.

Typically, the quest or portal fantasy begins with a sense of stability that is revealed to be the stability of a thinned land—Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979) is the most explicit³—and concludes with *restoration* rather than *instauration* (the making over of the world). Most portal-quest fantasies associate the king with the well-being of the land,⁴ and the condition of the land with the morality of the place. These thematic elements may seem coincidental, but they serve to structure the ideology of a narrative that is directive and coercive, and that narrows the possibilities for a subversive reading.

The origins of the quest fantasy, if not strictly speaking the portal fantasy, lie in epic, in the Bible, in the Arthurian romances, and in fairy tales. From the epic, portal and quest fantasies draw a certain unity of action, the sense that we follow characters through their beginning, middle, and end. This unity holds even where there are numerous characters. Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* sequence (1990 to present) rapidly disperses its cast, but we follow each character through their adventures in turn. The disunity of narrative is illusory; while it may appear to challenge the primacy of the single hero in the epic, in actuality this device operates to create linked epic narratives. The plot—while containing many convolutions—retains the essential simplicity of the epic. It is perhaps worth noting that of my suggested categories only the plots of portal-quest fantasies and intrusion fantasies seem indicated by their form.

Toohy suggests that epic, like tragedy, should contain reversal, recognition, and calamity, a structure that is instantly identifiable in the modern, three-volume quest fantasy and that often lurks in the background of the portal fantasy, as do the elements of glorification and nostalgia. Similarly, chronicle epics usually concentrate on the fortunes of a city or a region (Toohy 1–5), which in the modern fantasy may be transmuted into *the land*. The classic city epic is relatively uncommon in modern fantasy, although K. J. Parker's *Colours in the Steel* (1998; discussed in chapter 2) is precisely an account of the rise and fall-through-hubris of a city-state.

From epic, and from its descendants, the portal-quest fantasies have drawn ideas of sequenced adventures, journeys as transition, and the understanding that there is a destiny to follow.⁵ But it is in the New Testament and from later Christian writings that we find the notion of a portal:

what else is a posthumous heaven (a notion almost completely absent from the Old Testament) other than the ultimate in portals? But while portal and quest fantasies have been heavily influenced by these taproots, the transition is neither seamless nor without consequence.

Most modern quest fantasies are not intended to be directly allegorical, yet they all seem to be underpinned by an assumption embedded in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678): that a quest is a process, in which the object sought may or may not be a mere token of reward. The real reward is moral growth and/or admission into the kingdom, or redemption (although the latter, as in the Celestial City of *Pilgrim's Progress*, may also be the object sought). The process of the journey is then shaped by a metaphorized and moral geography—the physical delineation of what Attebery describes as a “sphere of significance” (*Tradition* 13)—that in the twentieth century mutates into the elaborate and moralized cartography of genre fantasy. The journeyman succeeds or fails to the extent he listens to those wiser or more knowledgeable than him, whether these be spiritual, fantastical, or human guides. It is of course quite possible to argue that the connection between *Pilgrim's Progress* and the portal-quest fantasy is tenuous: in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the pilgrim knows where the Celestial City is, so that it is a journey, rather than a quest; the point is simply to get there through many perils. Yet the same is true of a number of quest fantasies where the goal is to reach the city: Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) charts a path to the crown that lies at the end of the chessboard; C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle* (1956) concludes with a journey to the celestial city, as does—in a more mundane sense—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), in which the children must reach Caer Paravel. Later books with the same structure include Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Thendara House* (1983), Sheri S. Tepper's *Marianne* sequence (1985–89), and Jeff Noon's *Vurt* (1993), where escape through the portal is the ultimate end of the novel, and the result disappointing. And where it is not true, we should accept that many writers believed themselves to be emulating the structures of much favored books while in reality doing quite the opposite: hundreds of “Tolkienistas” have failed to notice that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a quest for power, but a journey to destroy power.⁷ In any event, the very presence of maps at the front of many fantasies implies that the destination and its meaning are known.

Similarly, many of the differences between the structures laid down by Bunyan and those created in the shared world of the quest fantasy are due to a reworking of expectations and codings to produce a moral rhetoric and moral geography more acceptable to modern tastes. It is commonly

assumed that the opposition to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that has emanated from many Christian fundamentalists in the United States centers simply on the use of magic and of the telling of untruths. There is a partial truth in this interpretation today, but the original opposition to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was directed at the highly individualistic morality of the main character. For the generation brought up on the film and modern ideas of American individualism, it is easy to miss the fact that Baum's Dorothy is *not* a nice child and that the message of the book has little to do with the communitarian values that prevailed in America's Christian heartland at the turn of the century,⁸ before the individualism of the West became the dominant discourse of the United States. This is encoded in the journey Dorothy undertakes. Unlike Bunyan's Pilgrim, Dorothy's journeys do not result in her own moral growth—she herself is a representation of a new morality—but in the moral growth of those she influences. She is *grace*, a concept quite offensive to those who believe that grace can be bestowed only by the Redeemer.

What underpins all of the above is the idea of moral expectation. Fantasy, unlike science fiction, relies on a moral universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral precepts. This belief is most true of the portal-quest narratives, and of the intrusion fantasies. But if intrusion fantasies are structured around punishment and the danger of transgression (see chapter 3), the portal-quest fantasies are structured around reward and the straight and narrow path. The epic and the traveler's tale are closed narratives. Each demands that we accept the interpretation of the narrator, and the interpretive position of the hero. The hero may argue with the gods, or with the rules of the utopia, but it is assumed that we will accept the paradigms of his argument. In modern fantasy this element is maintained even where, as in *A Voyage to Arcturus* by David Lindsay (1920) and *The Scar* by China Miéville (2002), we are dealing with an anti-quest.

Portal-quest fantasies have other, less visible, taproots. These others have contributed to the fantasies' rhetorical and moral structure and in particular have tended to reinforce this closed narrative. Most significant among these is the *club narrative*, a cozy discourse that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and that profoundly shaped the portal-quest fantasy in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Club Story is simple enough to describe: it is a tale or tales recounted orally to a group of listeners foregathered in a venue safe from interruption. Its structure

is normally twofold: there is the tale told, and encompassing that a frame which introduces the teller of the tale—who may well claim to have himself lived the story he's telling—along with its auditors and the venue. . . . At all levels of sophistication, the Club Story form enforces our understanding that *a tale has been told*. (Clute, *Conjunctions* 39: 421–422)

The last point, the understanding of the completeness of story, is perhaps the most crucial contribution of the club story to the portal-quest fantasy. The story made is one that is bounded by the rules of the club rhetoric. *The Canterbury Tales* is a club story, and so too, although less obviously, are *Pilgrim's Progress*, George MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895), and *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In each of these cases, a tale is recounted as if it has happened in the past. Elsewhere, the club story is embedded within the frame narrative.

In the club story, the storyteller, whatever his designation, is possessed of two essential qualities: he is uninterrupted and incontestable; and the narrative as it is downloaded is essentially closed. Although not entirely relevant here, it is hard to avoid the acknowledgment that the club story has a gendered origin, and that there are consequences embedded in these foundations. The club narrative is diegetic, a denial of discourse, an assertion of a particular type of Victorian masculinity, a private place uninterrupted by the needs of domesticity or even self-care (there are always servants in the club), combined with a stature signaled by the single-voiced and impervious authority. This sense of authority matters because, as we shall see, the modern portal-quest narratives are hierarchical: some characters are presented with greater authority than others—authority that is intended, destined, or otherwise taken for granted—and this hierarchy is frequently encoded in speech patterns and the choice of direct or indirect speech. Although a tenuous connection, the tendency of portal-quest fantasies to ignore the personal needs of the protagonists may be less a mere accident of poor writing, than a direct consequence of the link with this mode of storytelling. As their personal needs will be ignored, so too will be the needs of characterization. What matters is that there be no chinks in the story entire. Discussing Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1899), John Clute has written:

Like any Club Story, "Heart of Darkness" is both a story and a device to mandate its reception. The impurity of this is obvious—what we're describing here is in a sense a form of reportage—and may help account. It may be the "impurity" of this element of reportage at the heart of the Club Story form that accounts for

the fact that no literary theorist has ever mentioned it. Critics of the fantastic, dealing as they do with a set of genres intensely sensitive to the world, should have no such compunction. (*Conjunctions* 39: 422–423)

As in the true club story, it is the *unquestionable purity* of the tale that holds together the shape of the portal-quest narrative. In the club narrative, the ability to convince and to hold the floor is the sign of success, but the risk is always that the whole will not be sustained. In order to sustain it, the impurity and unreliability to which Clute alludes must be consistently denied and the authority and reliability of the narrator must be asserted. Either the story is accepted in its entirety, or it is entirely vulnerable; there is no room for the delicacies of interpretation. This structure and its attendant denial has a significant effect on the language of the portal-quest fantasy: in order to convince, to avoid too close analysis, the portal and quest fantasies attempt to convince through the accumulation of detail.

Fantasyland is constructed, in part, through the insistence on a received truth. This received truth is embodied in didacticism and elaboration. While much information about the world is culled from what the protagonist can see (with a consequent denial of polysemic interpretation), history or analysis is often provided by the storyteller who is drawn in the role of sage, magician, or guide. While this casting apparently opens up the text, in fact it seeks to close it down further by denying not only reader interpretation, but also that of the hero/protagonist. This may be one reason why the hero in the quest fantasy is more often an actor than an actor, provided with attributes rather than character precisely to compensate for the static nature of his role.

In the quest and portal fantasy much of the narrative is delivered in this club-story mode among a group of friends isolated in a context in which they will not be interrupted. Although "the journey" is a recognized function-trope in portal-quest fantasies, it is usually interpreted as a metaphor for a coming of age—it provides a space for the protagonists to grow up. But "the journey" also serves to divorce the protagonists from the world, and place them in a context in which they cannot question the primary narration because there is no evidence against which they can test the veracity of their source. Diana Wynne Jones manipulates this path in *The Crown of Dalemarch* (1993): the quest journey is begun precisely to avoid exposing an imposter. This approach, however, is not usual. More commonly, the journey is where information is discovered, interpreted, and disseminated, safe from the awkward questions the outside

world might provoke. The resemblance to the isolation inflicted on Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* is not coincidental. In *The Lord of the Rings*, after Gandalf's "death," the questors are even more willing to follow his interpretation of the adventure. Jones, again, makes the connection explicit in another Dalemark tale, the short story "The True State of Affairs" (1995), in which a woman traverses a portal only to find herself seized as a spy and locked in a tower. She can build a picture of the world she is in only by what she is allowed to know. The process of the quest or portal fantasy works, in one way or another, to construct an element of isolation and a focus on "the club." In contrast, and as I shall demonstrate, the intrusion fantasy is structured to encourage the protagonist to break out of the monologue.

There are almost always two clearly identifiable narrators in the portal-quest fantasy: the narrator of the microcosm (the world within a world) that we call the point of view character; and the narrator of the macrocosm, she who "stories" the world for us, making sense of it through the downloaded histories so common to this form of fantasy, or in the fragments of prophecy she leaks to us throughout the course of the text. Usually, but not always, this person is the implied narrator.

Let us consider first that point of view or diegetic character, for it is she who conditions our relationship to the fantasy world. She exemplifies the Bakhtinian insight that the narrator-focalizer dispenses the authoritative ideology. One of the defining features of the portal-quest fantasy is that we ride with the point of view character who describes fantasyland and the adventure to the reader, as if we are both with her and yet external to the fantasy world. What she sees, we see, so that the world is unrolled to us in front of her eyes, and through her analysis of the scene. One result is that the world is flattened thereby into a travelogue, a series of descriptions made possible by the protagonists' unfamiliarity with it. Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), a text to which I shall be referring frequently in this chapter because of the degree to which it is *the* generic quest fantasy, illustrates the point neatly. At the beginning of the novel, Flick, one of the two heroes, is a stranger in his own land. He should be so familiar with the area that all is taken for granted but instead: "the young man noticed immediately the unusual stillness that seemed to have captivated the entire valley this evening." Immediately the world is new to both him and us, even though it is new only in terms of what he is accustomed to. Such defamiliarization is necessary in order to justify the explanation of the world to the reader, and prepares us for the process of familiarization that takes place throughout the novel.

This extract characterizes the mode of engagement within the portal-quest fantasy: the hero *moves through* the action and the world stage, embedding an assumption of unchangingness on the part of the indigenes. This kind of fantasy is essentially imperialist: only the hero is capable of change; fantasyland is orientalized into the "unchanging past." This rejection of change is particularly noticeable in David Eddings's *The Belgariad* (1982–84), where we meet one culture dedicated to preserving the past (the faux-medievalist Arends) and one whose idea of preparing for the future is very much rooted in preservation (the Rivans). The Rivans have spent the previous centuries preserving their culture *precisely* for the appearance of our protagonist. This allows the protagonist not merely to insist upon his interpretation as he relays it to us, but to insist that it will always be valid. In this context, Garion's confusion ensures that we accept his realizations unquestioningly. To counteract such blind acceptance one might expect that a fantasy would work by making the *unfamiliar* strange, and we shall see just this effect in George MacDonald and David Lindsay's work. More commonly, however, the quest fantasy works by familiarization (Scholes 84), creating a world through the layering of detail, and making that detail comprehensible. Given the need for comprehensibility, the only way to continually create the sense of wonder needed by the portal and quest fantasy is to embroider continually, to prevent the accretion of comfort. When taken to excess we see the likes of the Harry Potter novels in which almost all of the imaginative material is in the world-building (the adventures themselves are game sequences and rather derivative)—or, as Colin Manlove has pointed out, the work of Lord Dunsany, of whose descriptive passages he writes, "Dunsany knows he is into a good thing here . . . and goes on for three more pages making it rather too much of a good thing" (*Impulse* 135). Michael Riffaterre describes this device as *diegetic overkill*, in which the representation of ostensibly insignificant details—in the case of the texts I'm discussing it could be jumping frog chocolates, lembas bread, or clothes that change color²—becomes a feature of realism (29–30).

This mode mediates between us and the protagonist. In seeing what he narrates to us, we are prevented from seeing *him*. The solution adopted by most writers in this genre—although not, interestingly, by Tolkien—is the *reverie*, a form of mimetic excess (Riffaterre 29–30). Bakhtin calls this form "the continuous hidden polemic or hidden dialogue with some other person on the theme of himself," but *reverie* is easier in the long term (207). The *reverie* is that moment when the protagonist (or on occasion another character) meditates on his own character, usually in terms of a flashback,

to achieve a "profound dialogic and polemical nature of self-awareness and self-affirmation" (207). This meditation should not be confused with a moment of memory, which tends to focus on the emotion felt, rather than the story (McCabe and Peterson 165). What characterizes these reveries is that they are fully narrativized: pages 2-4 of Mindy Klasky's *The Glasswright's Apprentice* (2000), for example, tell us of the heroine's entry into the guild and the conditions pertaining to that place. Later, Rani worries about a theft she has committed:

The theft made Rani nervous—she had been hired to clean the captain's quarters and she would be the most likely suspect when the soldier discovered his loss. She had become enough of a fixture in the Soldiers' Quarter that any of the girls who consorted with the guards would know to find her in Garadolo's lair. . . .

Even now, she looked back to her life as an apprentice with blinding fondness. She'd been so lucky then, so privileged that her most difficult task had been scrubbing a whitewashed table. (184-185)

What should be already known to us, the context of the world, is delivered as memory, and more specifically, as story.¹⁰ Because we cannot stand outside the narrative, the "omniscient narrator" is compromised: it is able to tell us only what Rani knows. We both see into her mind but are not, as in the first-person narrative, inside her head. The "omniscient narrator" limits our vision while asserting that we have privileged insight.

Occasionally these reveries are expressed as mutual revelation, a device Deborah Tannen suggests in real life is intended to show rapport: "By this strategy, the speaker expects his or her statement of personal experience to elicit a similar statement from the other." Unfortunately, authors rarely seem to remember that the "effectiveness of this device is dependent upon the sharedness of the system" (79). The single direction of information works instead to indicate the status-within-the-story of the speaker.

To steal yet again Clute's idea of "making storyable," I note that these reveries make storyable character and characteristics. Indeed, reverie and self-contemplation, far from creating depth, break the sense of immersion in a society, and are fundamentally antithetical to either character development or an immersive structure. It is a false mimesis that reminds us that we are in a narrated text and that *the protagonist's version must be true*. To doubt the validity of the reverie would be to destroy the impermeable nature of the club discourse: either the reverie is "true" or the entire structure collapses. Such is the case even where, as in Tad Williams's

The Dragonbone Chair (1989), the reverie that describes the protagonist is actually that of another person; it is Rachel (31-38) who—with improbable detail—remembers Simon's childhood for us. On the other hand, Robin Hobb, in the opening pages of *The Farseer: Assassin's Apprentice* (1996), acknowledges the persistent doubts: "on that day they [memories] suddenly begin, with a brightness and detail that overwhelms me. Sometimes it seems too complete and I wonder if it is truly mine. Am I recalling it from my own mind, or from dozens of retellings by legions of kitchen maids and ranks of scullions and herds of stables boys as they explained my presence to each other" (2).

Memory does not have to be delivered this way. Lloyd Alexander gets to the heart of the matter in *The Black Cauldron* (1965), a quest fantasy that is also a rite of passage novel, but is *not* a portal fantasy inasmuch as Taran is always familiar with his world. When Taran tries to buy the cauldron from Orddu, Orwen, and Orgoch in the marshes of Morva, one suggested price is a warm summer's day. Memory here is sense and feeling, yet this suggestion and its alternative—that they take one of his memories of Eilonwy—tell us much more about Taran than does a recounting of his childhood. Similarly, Tad Williams does not need to have his hero Simon think about being curious; his actions tell us that he is. Simon "could never understand how rooms that seemed as small as the doctor's did from outside—he had looked down on them from the bailey walls and paced the distance in the courtyard—how they could have such long corridors" (*The Dragonbone Chair* 14). At this point Simon is in the world in which he grew up, and Williams demonstrates neatly that in this—pre-quest—world he is fully immersed.

The reverie is a commodification of memory: one aspect of this ritualization of memory is that it reduces characters to that which can be described in terms essentially photographic. Stephen R. Donaldson, in *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977), provides us with a good example: "But where Lena was fresh and slim of line, full of unbroken newness, Atiaran appeared complex, almost self-contradictory" (51). This kind of description tells us more than we can possibly know or that *the observing character* can possibly know. There are two aspects to this formulation. To begin with, the narrative structure of the portal-quest fantasy, in which we move through the map, posits many characters as mere signposts. In this context we do not have time to truly learn about people, any more than we would "learn" about the tree we passed. The second, and related, aspect is that we are therefore forced to rely on intuition. The portal-quest fantasy is thus often the last resting place of physiognomy, a tradition the sf writer

Jeffrey Ford has mocked brilliantly in *The Physiognomy* (1997). This tradition is usually discussed in terms of race and fantasy, but the “racing” of heroes and villains is in part a consequence of a rhetoric that posits insight in terms of visual perception.

The narrativization of memory also affects the description of action. It is not action that is of interest but response; action has to be “seen” by the protagonist and the protagonist cannot see “his” own physical movements. In this form, expression and feeling cannot be interpreted; they must be described, pinned down for the reader. They must also maintain primacy in the narrative drive of the novel. In this mode of fantasy, action is there to carry emotive weight, so that fighting is “valiant” (see Brooks again) rather than “wild” (see Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian*). This emphasis on emotion is a distinct shift from, for example, the worlds of Conan the barbarian. The shift is from an externalized discourse of action—what we usually mean when we refer to the omniscient narrator—to the internalized discourse. Even the moment of recognition can be shaped by this demand. Toward the end of *Lord Foul’s Bane*, Thomas Covenant learns some of what was intended for him, but it is framed not as action, but as self-regard: “Then, with a sickening vertiginous twist of insight, he caught a glimpse of Lord Foul’s plan for him, glimpsed what the despoiler was doing to him. Here was the killing blow which had lain concealed behind all the machinations, all the subterfuge” (353).

This raises the question as to whether this internal narrative is *intended* to parallel the external narrative of exploration and observation. Can one have an internal quest that does not require the protagonist to move through a physical and internal landscape? There are very few portal fantasies that are not succeeded by journeys.¹¹ The implication of what I have set out above is that the journey through the mind, while not absolutely necessary to the format, is one way that has emerged to handle the need to create closed and reliable characters—reliable only in the sense that we must trust their own assessment of themselves in order for the veracity of the story to hold. Thomas Covenant is a twist, not an exception to the rule. His misinterpretation of his role, his refusal to accept responsibility, is the surety of his character’s narration. We believe him because Doubting Thomas is, in the final analysis, the most reliable witness—a double bluff.

This discourse and the insistence on the narrative and descriptive competence of the protagonist—even when we are told that they do not understand what is happening—thins the complexity of the world and makes of it a poorly painted stage set. The portal-quest fantasy by its very nature needs to deny the possibility of a polysemic discourse in order to

validate the “quest.” There can be only one understanding of the world: an understanding that validates the quest. And yes, that is recursive, a point I shall discuss further on.

There are some exceptions: the original grail stories offer polysemic narratives and question the reality, desirability, and possibility of “goal,” as do some modern quest fantasies (which I shall discuss at the end of the chapter). More generally, however, this issue is extended into the world-building of fantasyland. Nonspecific landscape is unrolled like a carpet in front of the character. This landscape even embraces the contrived design of Romantic landscape painting.¹² Note this comment from Raymond J. O’Brien: “Viewers, whether river travellers or gallery-goers, were commonly impressed with the importance of foreground. In landscapes, the foreground—although not always available to steamboat passengers—was the means by which the observer entered the scene (e.g., a path, a stream or falls, a river road, a railroad track, a cleft in the rocks). And while the middle ground contained the subject matter or object (mountain, river, or townscape), a distant background was also imperative to create a hazy, far-away panoramic effect” (171). The entrant into the portal-quest fantasy is precisely this kind of tourist—and as an aside, in so many they are tourists in an American landscape painting, moving through and into the grandeur of the landscapes—“Imagining forth vastness” (R. Wilson 5). In the British equivalent the viewer is more likely positioned gazing at a vista (Wilton).¹³ But in the absence of real depth, history, religion, and politics must receive a similar treatment. The difficulty is balancing the requirement that such matters *must always have been there* with the ignorance of the protagonist.

To some extent, almost all portal and quest fantasies use the figure of a guide to download information into the text. Here is where the classic portal fantasy has an advantage, in that those traveling through a declared portal are expected to be ignorant: it is perfectly plausible for the dwarf to fill in the children about the past few hundred years of Narnian history in *Prince Caspian* (1951). But in many quest fantasies, the portal is merely a move from the familiar village to the unfamiliar world. An impatient civics class always seems unnatural. Most people, however ignorant, know a little about most matters, enough to interrupt, to argue, to disturb the narrative. Yet these narratives, including the one described in *Prince Caspian*, are distinctive because they are delivered entirely in the authoritarian mode. These narratives are uninterrupted, unquestionable, and delivered absolutely in the mode of the club discourse: the travelers group around the narrator and listen to his (less commonly her)

description of great events or political structures. When the narratives are delivered by a guide figure, the result is that the guide usurps the narrator-focalizer role that might usually be supposed to belong to the protagonist (Rimmon-Kenan 83).

This form of fantasy embodies a denial of what history *is*. In the quest and portal fantasies, history is inarguable, it is "the past." In making the past "storyable," the rhetorical demands of the portal-quest fantasy deny the notion of "history as argument" which is pervasive among modern historians. The structure becomes ideological as portal-quest fantasies reconstruct history in the mode of the Scholastics,¹⁴ and recruit cartography to provide a fixed narrative, in a palpable failure to understand the fictive and imaginative nature of the discipline of history.

Tolkien set the trend for maps and prehistory, establishing a pattern for the quest narrative in which the portal is not encoded solely in the travelogue discovery of what lies ahead, but in the insistence that there is past and place *behind*, and that what lies behind must be thoroughly known and unquestioned before the journey begins. As Diana Wynne Jones has pointed out, maps are a substitute for place, and an indication that we have to travel; they also, however, fix the interpretation of a landscape. Maps are no more geography than chronology and legend are history, but in portal-quest fantasies, they complete the denial of discourse.

Since the late 1970s, genre fantasy has frequently been signaled by these two devices: the map—which, as Diana Wynne Jones sarcastically observed, lists *everywhere* we will be visiting (*Guide* 10)—and the fixed and narrated past. Far too many post-Tolkien portal-quest fantasies begin with a download of legend. Their very anonymity creates the status that the closed club narrative requires. Occasionally, they are signed by a legendary figure, or by "a historian," but the presentation of these extracts is rarely placed against other, disputatious sources. Authors of these fantasies write as if Mark Twain had never pointed out the danger of trusting the presentable document. Jones puts it memorably:

Scrolls are important sources of information about either HISTORY or MAGIC, and are only to be found jealously guarded in a MONASTERY or TEMPLE. You will usually have to steal your copy. Against this inconvenience is the highly useful fact that the Information in the Scroll will be wholly correct. There is, for some reason, no such thing as a lying, mistaken or inaccurate Scroll. (*Guide* 166)

See also her entry for PROPHECY (148–149). The consequence is that the found document is in the chair relating the club story; either all of it is

correct, or none of it is. We can no longer debate history, in the sense of interpretation, analysis, discovery; we can only relate the past. This scholasticism permits only macronarratives: the past in these books is always what has been recorded about the greats, and it has always been recorded *some-where*.

Yet concomitant with this is a reverence for *the* book, even while seeing books as alien artifacts to be decoded. This returns us once more to Bunyan and to generations of evangelicals for whom the Bible was not an ethical discussion but a book of riddles and challenges (Keeble xxiii).

Things that seem to be hid in words obscure,
Do but the Godly mind the more allure;
To Study what those Sayings should contain,
That speak to us in such a Cloudy strain.

(*Pilgrim's Progress*, 130)

This verse might come straight from the prologue of a modern fantasy. Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1965–77) sequence is structured around rhymes to be deconstructed; *The Belgariad* has its Codex capable of predicting the coming of the Rivan King; Jeff Noon's feathers in *Vurt* are encoded fantasy-game riddles that offer a way out into otherworld. Each, like *Pilgrim's Progress*, constructs *the text* as a portal into a promised world. Running alongside this is an ideology of heroism that denies current authority in favor of an omnipresent power, yet prizes specifically the ability of the common man to decipher the code that will lead one through the gate. External means of testing veracity are closed off, and we are further sealed into the story.

As Keeble describes it: "The regenerate are distinguished from the unregenerate not by any exceptional abilities or virtue but by their faith: they keep on going" (xvii). Such describes both the regenerate Christian and the predestined hero in modern quests (and crops up most in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* sequence [1995–2001]). Keeble points out: "The saint only gains final assurance of perseverance when he has persevered" (xix). Similarly evident in many modern portal-quest fantasies is the Puritan belief that "it is by playing a full part in this world that salvation is won" (xiii). Yet perseverance is defined in part by the ability to stay on the straight and narrow path, to follow the words of prophecy and the delivered interpretation—in effect, for the hero to maintain his own position-as-reader.

The idea is picked up in a number of fantasies, but perhaps most explicitly at the end of Lloyd Alexander's *The High King* (1968), where Taran is

informed that he was only ever a collection of "ifs." In fantasy sequences such as *The Belgariad*, *Assassin's Apprentice* and its sequels, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and many others, there is an overwhelming sense of this predictive narrative shaping the text, of the book of riddle interpreted only in the light of the successful conclusion. *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926), which I shall otherwise be considering predominantly as an immersive fantasy, could be read as a reply to *Pilgrim's Progress*—and to the classic portal fantasy, as will subsequently emerge, because of its message accept what *is* and contextualize your evidence; do not rely on only one source. Even anti-quest fantasies such as *The Scar* seem able only to fight against this structure; with their dead ends and celestial cities rejected, they cannot construct anything else.

The assumptions that "the past" is unarguable, that it just *is*, and that "knowledge" is to be rediscovered rather than generated, has narrative consequences. Binabik, the historian-mage of Tad Williams's *Dragonbone Chair* (1988), assumes that in order to *learn* anything, he must return to the archives for research. Robin Hobb's *Assassin* sequence is structured within the writing of a history that depends for its backstory on material found in other, written histories. Each chapter begins with a memoir not dissimilar to the Venerable Bede's history: recollection and gossip masquerading as an accurate description of the past. The argument is circular, but nonetheless valid; yet the consequence for the author is that in order to preserve this sense, any history narrated must be done so in an authoritative fashion. The moment one introduces argument, one also introduces research and experimentation: portal-quest fantasies are full of learned people, who have read many books. Knowledge is fixed and it is *recursive*, and in this it demonstrates the peculiar and specific Christian heritage of the modern portal-quest fantasy. As Northrop Frye wrote, "How do we know that the Gospel story is true? Because it confirms the prophecies of the Old Testament. But how do we know that the Old Testament prophecies are true? Because they are confirmed by the Gospel story. Evidence, so called, is bounced back and forth between the testaments like a tennis ball" (*Code* 78). This circularity creates a reductiveness that utterly undermines any real notion of learning in the portal fantasy and has led me to muse on what a truly *Jewish* fantasy—with all the argument endemic to my religion—might look like. Peter David's *Sir Apropos of Nothing* (2001), whose sidekick refuses his predestined role, who spends much of the time raging at fate, and who frequently finds his achievements unapplauded, is one candidate.

But to get back on track, this one element, the insistence of the fixedness of history and of learning, divides quest fantasy from immersive fantasy.

Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) can make room for the experimental method (as, interestingly, can the later and more immersive Discworld novels) but *The Scar*, also by Miéville, must send people looking for a lost book and a lost scientist. Very occasionally, there is an understanding displayed that history cannot be written and preserved with fixative. Delia Sherman and Ellen Kushner's *The Fall of the Kings* (2002) is a book about the writing of history, whose protagonist is a scholar who wishes to return to the documents, to reconstruct history from source materials, and to argue with the belief of a fixed past, a found narrative. But the tale betrays the reader and the protagonist: at the end, history is again "found," the past revealed to us through dreams and through magic, rendering the research pointless and restoring "the past" to its rightful place above mere history. The historian's craft is swapped for the club-story narrative, fully hermetic.

The nature of the club story is that it valorizes the control of the narrator. This one factor may help to explain why, although many quest fantasies claim to be about a remaking of the world, few can be considered genuine instauration fantasies. A contributing factor is the portal-quest fantasies' denial of argument with the universe. It is a truism that fiction is about conflict, but in the portal-quest fantasies the possibilities for such conflict are limited by the ideological narrative that posits the world, as painted, as *true*. Consequently, it is this closed narrative that restricts the plot possibilities for most quest and portal novels. If multiple interpretations are to be denied, if the narrative is to be hermetic, then the novel becomes locked in the patterns that Clute observed in the full fantasy: wrongness, thinning, recognition, and healing/return (defined in Clute and Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*.) Such patterns, rather than being a coincident archetype, become fundamental to the structure. The genre accrues formalisms, and authors negotiate with these forms; one aspect of this negotiation is experimenting with which positions and rhetorics best familiarize (or defamiliarize) the reader with the fantastic.

Given the huge number of books written in this category, the books discussed below have been selected according to their historical significance, to their status as archetypes. (They are also the consequence of a trawl among the recommendations of a number of readers, to ensure that the choices presented here would not be entirely self-justifying.) While Tolkien and Lewis may have provided the archetypes of modern fantasy, the taproots of the genre are rather different. The emergence of a rhetoric to accompany this position can be traced to the earliest of the portal fantasies. Therefore, if we are to consider the development of the rhetorical styles and grammar of this mode of fantasy, we should begin

by considering the condition of portal and quest fantasy before Tolkien and Lewis. The best known are George MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895), Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). When we lay these alongside one another, and in the company of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*—a book that has had an immense if unconscious influence on the structure of quest fantasies and that shows many of the traits that later emerge of markers of this particular subgenre—certain patterns emerge.

Early Quest and Portal Fantasies

For Bunyan, the fantastic was that which was made up, rather than that which was supernatural, and it is in this context that we need to consider the dream sequences that provide the contextual structure of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the modern fantasy, the dream sequence is conventionally seen as a distancing from the fantastic, a means of denying belief. When taken at face value in a text—such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—it has very specific consequences for the grammar of the fantastic. A consideration of *Pilgrim's Progress*, however, suggests that, in its religious context, dream as an entryway to the fantastic functioned rather differently.

Although Bunyan felt compelled to use dreaming to contextualize his allegory (perhaps because of the Puritan suspicion of fiction), that dream is closer to a vision of the prophetic than to the modern idea of the dream as unreal. It brings the afterlife *closer*, making the consequences of sin manifest. Bunyan's Pilgrim comes to him in a dream because the story is more than allegory; it is a spiritual gift, an aspect of visionary fancy.

Yet within *Pilgrim's Progress*, the dream structure is under attack from the needs of the narrative. The "Dream" as vision is a reminder of the reality of heaven; as *dream* it deprives us of completeness. While Bunyan avoids much of the exposition of landscape and personnel that will mark the portal fantasy and prevents full immersion in the fantastic, the repeated lines "and in the Dream" serve the same purpose, to distance the reader and to remind us that we are mere *external* observers of Christian's quest, not part of his company. The tale is being narrated to us. At other times, our immersed participation is demanded as a spiritual exercise. The effect on the tone of the fantasy is to create an unevenness, an alternation of description and immersion, of distancing and familiarity. At

times we walk beside Christian, at other times we observe him from afar. But while in a dream we may be ineffectual, there is nonetheless the sense that we are at the center of the dream.

The vision is of elsewhere; it presumes that the frame world (our world) is already thinned, and provides the moment of rupture in which elsewhere becomes here. In *Pilgrim's Progress* it is the moment of recognition, where the man becomes Christian "(for that was his name)"; we know that we are now fully in the tale (10). The one significant difference in the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* (which narrates the tale of Christiana's search for her husband, and for God through him) is that the dream becomes a matter of doubt. Although it is couched as a dream at the beginning of the act, it is also phrased as "Travels into those Parts" (143). An ambiguity creeps into the text, an ambiguity remade at the close, "Shall it be my Lot to go that way again, I may give those that desire it, an Account of what I here am silent about." For Bunyan, it might have been a sign to the reader that he was "fantasizing" in the second book, making up what came to him as divine inspiration in the first. To secular eyes, however, the narrative has become a greater part of reality because the power of vision is no longer reliable—or has, perhaps, become more metaphorical. The challenge to future fantasists is to make that vision more real, and they do so by making the portal of dream into a material portal of wood and wardrobe.¹⁵ What proves less easy is to move beyond the positioning of reader as recipient of the tale told.

Bunyan's own insistence that *Pilgrim's Progress* is allegory reinforces the problem. Attebery argues that allegory "continually points beyond itself to the moral or metaphysical truths under examination" (*Tradition* 180). But in order to do this, Bunyan must strain his narrative structure. We cannot merely follow Christian, because that would be to risk that we do not understand the message. Instead both the omnipresent narrator (by lapsing out of the dream sequence) and Christian (in a pattern of telling and retelling as he meets each signpost character) guide our interpretation of the quest. In this narrative, it is the telling thereof, the rethinking of it, that is significant, rather than the adventure itself. Some of this rethinking remains in *The Lord of the Rings*: Bilbo's writing of his and Frodo's story will have resonance; Pippin and Merry will relate their tales to Treebeard, who will become part of the narrative and will be convinced. This element remains only hesitantly in the modern tradition, expressed, as we shall see, within the club story. The point is, the fantasy is made fantasy in part by *being related*.