Opening Moves: The Entry into the Other World

MICHAEL MENDELSON

The expanded critical interest in fantasy has begun to spawn various taxonomies of the genre, divisions into high and low, pure and applied, as well as numerous classifications into subcategories.¹ I would like to offer my own, admittedly crude partitioning of fantasy literature. Let me first say that any literature that deals in part or at length with impossible happenings must, if it is to give rise to meaning, bring those impossibilities into some relation with the pedestrian world of the merely possible. The relationship between the two worlds—one fantastic, one familiar—can take three primary forms. First, the fantastic world can be narratively autonomous yet conceptually analogous in some way to the real world, or in Tolkien’s celebrated terminology, a secondary world distinct from the primary one. Examples of this class would include Spenser’s Faerie Land or Tolkien’s own Middle Earth.

The second category involves the penetration of the fantastic into a primary world of generally mimetic proportions. Kafka’s Metamorphosis or Charles Williams’ fiction comes to mind here. The final group, and perhaps the oldest in terms of lineage, is the other-world journey in which a hero (or occasionally a heroine) leaves the sanctity of the primary or mimetic world and enters a domain of mystery and wonder before returning home a new man changed by his adventures. This last pattern can be traced from the third century B.C. Argonautica and the twelfth-century flowering of the form in Chrétien and others, through its numerous Renaissance expressions, to the Gothic novel and Scott’s romances, and so into the nineteenth-century, where its formulas were revived and recast and gave birth, I believe, to what we now study under the rubric of fantasy.

My interest is with one aspect of this last category, the other-world romance. This aspect is the structural phase of the narrative in which the hero
crosses the dividing line between the representational and the fantastic worlds. This introductory trope, what I will call the boundary situation, is of particular interest because it allows us to see the two worlds in close proximity and so to begin to explore for a satisfactory connection between them. This opportunity to establish some context for interpretation is especially important in fantasy where the ground rules of ordinary experience are continually overturned. “We are in the other world,” says a character from George MacDonald’s *Lilith*, “but in which or what sort of other world?” My premise is that a close examination of the opening moves in the narrative of the other-world journey will help this question.

To explore this idea, I have chosen several works by MacDonald (1824–1905) and William Morris (1834–96) not only because I think that these two writers are at the fountainhead of modern fantasy, but also because the finesse with which they handle the formal conventions of the emerging genre allows the reader a clear view of exactly what is involved in the trope of the boundary situation. George MacDonald wrote *Phantasies* in 1858 at the height of “the great tradition” of Victorian realism. His direct literary predecessors are to be found in the German Kunstmärchen tradition of Goethe, Novalis, and E. T. A. Hoffmann, a tradition MacDonald alludes to in subtitling his fiction “A Fairy Romance for Men and Women.” The story begins on the hero’s twenty-first birthday when he is invested with the authority of the senior member of a prosperous family. Among his privileges is access to a closed chamber where his father had left some private papers locked in a secretary. He approaches the desk “like a geologist . . . about to turn up to the light some buried strata of the human world, with its fossil remains charred by passion, petrified by tears” (pp. 15–16). The metaphor of geological descent is typically Romantic and points toward the internalized direction of the hero’s impending journey. More specifically, the other-world journey will involve excavations of the “buried strata” of the hero’s familial past. Northrop Frye writes that in romance “the descent theme often has a great deal to do with one’s descent in the genealogical sense, where the crucial event is the discovery of the relation between the chief characters and their parents.” In this case, the crucial event is the recovery by the motherless hero of some link with his female heritage, of which he knows nothing (see pp. 18, 22). In consequence, the narrative will be dominated by the hero’s uncertain relations with a series of female figures.

The mysterious atmosphere of the opening setting soon yields to the miraculous as Anados, the hero, uncovers a secret drawer in the secretary from which springs a comely spirit who introduces herself as his fairy grandmother. *When Anados attempts to embrace her, she rebuffs him saying, “A man must not fall in love with his grandmother you know”* (p. 18).
This encounter, with its Oedipal overtones, hints that the other world the hero is about to enter is a libidinized domain, erotic in its allure, where he must strive for a more comprehensive maturity than that conferred upon him by his age or legal status, or that allowed him in his own Victorian world of civilized restraint. Structurally, the fairy is the conventional harbinger who issues the “call to adventure” and who effects the hero’s transfer into the other world. As Anados gazes at her, her eyes “spread round me like seas, still as death and hoary as the moon, sweeping into bays and around capes and islands, away, away I know not whither” (p. 18). On the literal level, this passage describes the process of falling asleep from which Anados will wake the next morning on the brink of fairy land. From this perspective, we see the boundary event as a metaphorical falling asleep to the real world and a waking-up to the dreamlike world of fairy.

But the imagery of the passage points to a symbolic context beyond this initial formulation. All the imagery of the passage emanates from the eyes of the fairy and is not only intensely feminine (the fluctuating seas and hoary moon) but also distinctly uteran (the dark, still waters that insulate the hero from actual life). In the argot of depth psychology, this “sinking into the dark waters” is a case of uteran regression. “In dreams, as in mythology,” says Freud, “the delivery of the child from the uteran waters is commonly represented, by way of distortion, as the entry of the child into the water.” Under the auspices of his fairy grandmother, then, the young hero undergoes a parturition or natal dream which accomplishes the essential ritual task of transporting the dreamer across the boundary into a new, fantastic world. And if we follow the current of metaphoric logic, we may also read this brief episode as a symbolic dying into the womb from which the hero will emerge newborn.

When Anados awakes, he sees a water basin on his dresser overflowing and running like a stream across the carpet. The stream here is the conventional one which separates the real from the fabulous world and which appears in the Peril, in Goethe’s “Märchen,” and in The Scarlet Letter to cite only a few instances. When the hero steps across this stream, he disappears for a ritual twenty-one days (he just turned twenty-one) into a world where characters are largely projections of his desires and anxieties, and where events are a function of his own development within a world MacDonald calls “the deeper fairy land of the soul” (p. 78). The maelstrom of dreamlike imagery that confronts the reader throughout this excursion is a continual challenge to interpretation. But the primary vectors of thematic interest (the hero’s erotic rite of passage and his emotional death and rebirth) have been forecast in the cluster of images that surrounds the boundary situation. In MacDonald’s next adult fantasy, Lilith, written forty years later, the liminal crossing is into a very different world; but
there too the events of the boundary situation establish the imaginative patterns of the work, its “order of vision.”

In *Lilith* the initial situation is very similar: an orphaned hero has just returned from Oxford to take possession of his family’s estate. But for the older MacDonald the nature of the internalized quest has changed considerably. Like the hero of *Phantastes*, *Lilith’s* Mr. Vane knows little of his ancestors, but he does know that “a notable number of them had been given to study” (p. 188). Vane himself has a strong speculative bent and is drawn, he says, to the relation between physical and metaphysical facts. He is, in Jungian terms, a thinking type with an introverted orientation, and this speculative nature has important consequences for his impending adventures.

The boundary event in *Lilith* is first announced by the presence of a shadowy old man who is reputed to have been the librarian of the family estate several generations before. When this ghostly figure appears one day, walking through the study and ascending a narrow staircase, Mr. Vane follows him. The hero emerges in an expansive garret that he refers to as “my own, yet unexplored” (p. 192) and as “the brooding brain of the building” (p. 197). MacDonald once told his son that for him winding stairways had always seemed analogous “to our own secret stair up into wider vision.” In this case, by climbing the winding stairway up into the attic the hero indeed enters the “wider vision” of a distinctly cognitive realm. And though the exacting physiological/architectural allegory of Spenser’s Castle of Alma is not invoked, it is clear that by following a path from his library to the upper reaches of the house the hero has come into what critic Richard Reis has called “the unknown regions of the mind” and what Vane himself refers to as “the heart of my brain” (p. 198).10

The specific point within the attic where Mr. Vane crosses the boundary between worlds is an old mirror, an image that serves to expand the notion of the other world as a realm of expanded perception. The mirror is, of course, a traditional metaphor for the self; and in this romance, by entering into the mirror's image the hero initiates that most traditional of narrative quests—the search for the true self. As soon as he has crossed the boundary, the hero is told by Mr. Raven, his guide, that he has just come through a door. When the confused Vane protests that a mirror is not a door, the Raven replies that the only doors that Vane knows are “doors in,” whereas the mirror-door is a “door out” (p. 194). The hero’s name now serves to signify the vanity of his egocentric life. “Hitherto,” admits Vane, “I had loved my Arab mare and my books more, I fear, than live man or woman” (p. 235). This mirror, then, is both a point of exit from a life of self-absorption and limited horizons and an entrance into a domain of expanded intellectual awareness.
Once across the boundary, Vane is besieged by self-doubt and several times finds himself back in the primary world. We soon learn that the two worlds “cohabit” the same physical space, a realization that leads the hero to speculate that his new surroundings constitute an “idea of existence” (p. 198). But ultimately, after several stumblings back and forth between the two worlds, Vane determines to venture on his own through the portal of the mirror. This act of volition is in distinct contrast to the hero of Phantastes who descends into a night-world of dreams while asleep. Vane, instead, consciously chooses to ascend into a realm that the romance reveals to be a plane of metaphysical struggle. And if the form of Vane’s ensuing adventures remains dreamlike in its archetypal characters and inexplicable transformations, that dream does not emanate from the unconscious; rather, it is an attempt at supra-conscious vision, an expansion into an upper, transcendental world where the journey of the individual hero retraces the biblical typology of exodus, travail, and redemption. Once again, it is at the liminal point of the boundary, that frontier between the real and the fantastic worlds, where the nature of this visionary world is first established through a pattern of distinctly cognitive, perceptual images. From this notably “mentalyzed” threshold, the hero climbs to “a land of thought, higher up and farther in” (pp. 400–401) than he has been before, and from which he moves out beyond the limited and fallen conception of the individual ego and toward the redemption of his transcendental identity.

Unlike MacDonald, whose fairy romances begin in the Victorian present, William Morris begins his late prose romances (all written in the nineties) in a vaguely medievalized setting distant in time and place from the industrial England he so detested. Nevertheless, his narratives trace a journey from an essentially representational, mimetic world to a secondary, fantastic one. In The Wood Beyond the World (1894), Golden Walter, the son of a great merchant, marries the daughter of a rival family and is driven to distraction by her infidelity. Desiring escape from his torment, Walter resolves to set sail on one of his father’s trading ships and “see other lands” in the hope that he can find “a new man in me.”2 As he prepares to leave, he sees a trio of strange characters (a dwarf, a maiden with an iron ring around her ankle, and a majestic lady) enter the ship moored beside his own. The hero is aroused by the beauty of the two women, but confused since no one else seems to see the group.

When his ship casts off, Walter imagines that it follows in the wake of the other vessel “as if the twain were beads strung on one string and led away by it into the same place” (p. 6). To this point we have every indication that Walter’s other-world adventure will be a typically erotic one in which the hero seeks to heal the wounds to his libido by pursuing his im-
aginary animas. And indeed it will; but Morris postpones the boundary crossing in order to develop other ideas. After some months spent recovering from his heartache, the hero is interrupted by the news that his father has been killed in a feud with his wife's family. Walter immediately makes plans to return home, but as soon as he does so he again sees the mysterious trio, his harbingers, and he finds himself "thinking and devising if by any means he might find out in what land dwelt those three" (p. 10). The business of the unconscious, it seems, takes precedence over social and political obligations, even for this socialist author.

Nevertheless, Walter determines to head for home; but his ship is lost at sea in a great fog bank and is then blown off course by a fierce storm, events that W. H. Auden, in his iconography of the sea, equates with the descent into the unconscious. After an original attempt, then, to "refuse the call," the hero unwittingly conforms to the essential edict of the romance quest: to retreat from the world of social pressure and enter the internalized, fantastic realm of the psyche where he can confront the disturbing images of his desire directly. When the gale subsides, Walter and his crew emerge on the shore of an idyllic country beyond the press of political turmoil. The only inhabitant of this pastoral country is an old carle who guards the path to a secret wood. The Golden Bough appeared four years before this romance, and Carol Silver has argued persuasively that the old carle is closely related to the priest of Nemi who protects the sacred grove of Diana. After listening to the carle's story and warnings about the Wood Beyond the World, Walter (who to this point has been a lethargic protagonist) is catalyzed by his need to break through to this land of "strange adventure" (p. 21) and encounter the images of his vision. With some stealth, he slips past this portal guard and enters the locus amoenus of the enchanted wood. And in the process of crossing this ritualized boundary and entering the other world, he is transformed from a despairing cuckhold to the prototype of the heroic adventurer.

What is different about the early phase of Morris' romance is that this hero must first struggle with his social allegiances; that is, a series of preliminal steps preface the boundary crossing and establish a problematic context for the other-world journey. But lest Walter's excursion into the other world still seem to contradict the political commitment of his creator, or, more importantly, lest the romance itself seem the escapade into frivolity and indulgence that contemporaries like Shaw thought it was, it should be noted that for Morris the success of any culture depends upon what he describes as "the freedom and cultivation of the individual" and, more specifically, on a "free and unfettered animal life for man first of all." The romance in general and the boundary situation in particular serve to give clarifying (if symbolic) form to this revolutionary idea: the
journey to the Wood and the erotic fulfillment found there are the necessary preludes to social change. Indeed, once the hero penetrates the sacred wood and rescues the enslaved maiden (thereby casting off the chains that have bound his own development), he and his new bride reemerge into a primary, historical world to institute a succession of momentus social and political reforms.

Some final thoughts now on this border station along the road that leads from the civilized, primary world to the secondary, marvelous one. Since fantasy is under no obligation to declare a direct contingency between the representational and the fabulous worlds, and since the "judicious reader" is ever alert to the establishment of some connection between the two by which to liberate meaning, the juxtaposition of the two worlds in the boundary crossing in itself serves the motives of interpretation. As Edward Said has pointed out, the "beginnings" of any text allow us the opportunity to observe the "first steps in the intentional production of meaning" before we are confronted with the "tumbling disorder of a brute reality which will not settle down." 17 The beginnings of the other-world romance, with its highly conventionalized nature, are especially helpful in decoding the complex reverberations opened up by a fantastic reality.

Secondly, since character has taken on an expanded dimension in fantasy written after the emergence of the novel (i.e. since the quest of the modern other-world journey is particularized around an individualized protagonist), the narrative period before the crossing helps to establish the nexus of values connected with this character and an angle of vision that structures the ensuing quest. When Chrétien's Gawain and Lancelot cross the water and sword bridges and enter into "the kingdom from whence no stranger returns," they are idealizations of the chivalric persona in its dualist form as dashing courtier and christological savior. The protagonists of MacDonald and Morris, while not the loci of diverse and subtle impulse we find in Jamesian fiction, are nevertheless individuated in such a way during the beginnings of their narratives that the pre-liminal ethos established there is proleptic of an other world which, in large measure, is an extension of their desires. Anados is the young man who must achieve some rapprochement with his libidinal fantasies before he can assume his true inheritance and maturity. Mr. Vane is a more contemplative hero who, while he too confronts the demands of eros, also moves "higher up" to a metaphysical realm of expanded intellectual and spiritual vision. And Golden Walter must first confront his own "animal life" before he can take up the unavoidable mantle of social/political activism.

In all cases, the hero comes into a heightened awareness of his full identity by entering the lande aventureuse of fantasy, where he matures by paradoxically absorbing the dream world into waking consciousness. Alice
tells the Mock Turtle that she is a “different person” in Wonderland than she was yesterday at home. The constituents of that difference are first declared at the moment of entry, the Open Sesame of the other-world adventure. By detailing how the two worlds are connected, a good deal is said about what organizes the unfamiliar and often elliptic world of fantasy. Like the Ciceronian “exordium” that inaugurates the formal address, the opening moves establish the rhetorical momentum of the fantasy. In Phantastes the hero, newly adrift in his fantastic world, remarks, “It is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land” and one who travels there soon learns to “take everything as it comes . . . in a condition of chronic wonder” (p. 33). As readers we are both inside and out of fairy land, and, consequently, we have been happily afforded the double pleasure of both wondering and accounting.

Notes
1. An interesting cross-section of these new classifications is presented in The Aesthetics of Fantasy, ed. Roger C. Schlobin (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame and Harvester Press, 1982); see esp. essays by Zahorski and Boyer, Landow, and Crossley.
2. George MacDonald, Phantastes and Lilith (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 269. All subsequent quotations from both these works will be from this edition and will be cited in parentheses in the text.
7. Subsequent episodes confirm the importance of ritual death and palingenesis, or rebirth, as essential acts in the growth of the hero’s spirit; see esp. chs. 5, 18–19, and 24. It is also worth noting that MacDonald, a minister and a close biblical student, may be alluding here to an analogous scene from John 3:4–5 in which Nicodemus asks Jesus if man “can enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” to which Christ responds, “Except a man be born of water and spirit [the “still seas” and fairy spirit] he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.”
8. For a full discussion of the various barriers on the threshold of the other world, see Howard Patch, The Other World (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950).
11. With regard to the “intellectual” nature of this fantastic adventure, it is helpful to recall that the quest begins in a library and ends with the closing of a “large book” (p. 419). These framing events serve to characterize the nature of the activities within their limits.


