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Beyond All Worlds: George MacDonald, the Pre-Tolkienians, and the Forgotten Possibilities of Fantasy

Ethan Patrick Stevens

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Abstract

The history of modern fantasy has been powerfully shaped by the worldbuilding paradigm so successfully executed in J.R.R. Tolkien's 1954-55 trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. However, there were nearly a hundred and fifty years of creative work between the birth of fantasy as a genre and Tolkien's publication of *The Lord of the Rings.* By examining the pre-Tolkienian fantasists, we find that Tolkien's way of exhaustive consistency was not, and is not, the only way to write fantasy. *Phantastes* (1858), the first novel by the influential Victorian fantasist George MacDonald, defies contemporary worldbuilding standards almost constantly in its use of references to real world phenomena within Fairy Land and its inclusion of elements that have no precedent or rules of explanation elsewhere in the book. Yet these are not failures of worldbuilding, but instead instances of a consistent alternative paradigm to worldbuilding that I call 'aesthetic cohesion.' This method draws upon the forms of German Romanticism to bind the elements of the novel together, using implicit principles of mood and evocation. In this thesis, I argue that Worldbuilding is a legitimate mode for writing fantasy, but its hegemony has forced into one narrow path the genre that, perhaps more than any other, has the potential for unlimited diversity.

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Chapter One: Worldbuilding and its Origins

Modern fantasy is a uniquely rigorous genre. It is not exceptionally rigorous about its plotting, nor its characters, nor (often) about its use of language. In those respects, it is no more or less rigorous than any other diverse and popular genre. What modern fantasy is rigorous about is its own impossibility. Within it, all elements differing from the real world are rigorously quantified and analyzed. A quick glance at contemporary fantasy writing blogs and manuals will show a deep preoccupation with the natural sciences, history, and especially sociology. Carefully traced genealogies, notes on monster biology, remarks on weather patterns, and even whole invented languages often fill these narratives. All this diverse activity goes under a single name: worldbuilding. And in the genre of fantasy today, this quality is equal to plot, character, and language in determining whether a work is good or not. For a more precise definition of worldbuilding, I go to Péter Kristóf Makai's essay "Beyond Fantastic Self-Indulgence":

> I define world-building as the aesthetic practice of imbuing the story-world of a literary piece (especially works of speculative fiction) with a semblance of believable completeness by inventing a faux-history, detailed geography, mythology, social history, economy and fantastic infrastructure that keeps the societies of the fictional world alive and ticking. (58)

Fantasy is, of course, a genre defined by content. It does also have forms and styles that occur frequently within the genre (often derived from premodern literature--more on that in Chapter Two), and as Farah Mendlesohn has noted in her watershed *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), "form cannot be wholly abstracted from content or ideology" (4). However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will consider fantasy to be most clearly distinguished from other genres of fiction, and particularly from its counter-genre of realism, by its content. Specifically, I would like to define

it as 'fiction of the nonreal,' as opposed to fiction that is merely nonrealistic, such as the exaggerations achieved by humor, adventure, horror, or other forms.

Based on this definition of fantasy, worldbuilding might seem to arise naturally for aesthetic reasons. It would seem that fantasy authors attempt to be scientifically exhaustive because, as pointed out in the foreword to the world-building manual *Eighth Day Genesis*, "Worlds should be able to be touched, smelled, seen, and heard. Each of these things is vital to creating reality. The smallest details can illuminate volumes" (Klein 2). However, the essentiality of worldbuilding to modern fantasy is the effect of a deeper and to some extent stranger phenomena taking place between the writer and the reader. To quote an article on worldbuilding from Chris Winkle, founder and co-editor of the speculative fiction blog and editing service Mythcreants.com:

> As soon as you express something in your fiction that doesn't match known reality, you have created a world. Anyone who consumes your work will look at everything you've implied about your fictional setting, and they'll form a working model of your world in their head ("Getting Started with Worldbuilding").

This assumption that readers demand a perfect consistency from the fantastic world is unquestioned by most people who have written or have (to any large extent) read contemporary fiction of the nonreal. Key to this is the concept of "logical consistency". According to this idea, authors should lay out rules for how any fictional elements work, whether they be magic systems, traditions of etiquette, or imaginary law codes, and then authors should never deviate from those rules without a thorough explanation or, at the very least, a good deal of foreshadowing.

If worldbuilding seems like an impossible task, that is because it is. The above-quoted article by Winkle also states that:

> Worldbuilding comprises everything we know about our reality and everything we guess about how our world could be different. It's so complicated that a single article on worldbuilding will never do the craft justice. It's so knowledge-based that you could research it for your entire life and still have thousands of unanswered questions. ("Getting Started with Worldbuilding")

This in no way means that people haven't tried to be exhaustive. This is what leads to the modern fantasist's preoccupation with science and sociology, since if one has not articulated one's own system of rules governing a difference from the real world, it is assumed that this difference will follow the rules of our world. To give a few concrete examples of the generalizations alluded to in the article cited above, Mythcreants.com also has an article on the "Shaping the Bones of Your World" concentrating on working out the planetary geology first, and then deducing the kinds of cultures it could give rise to second (Kier). *Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction*, a book published by Writers Digest Books, contains chapters bearing titles sounding like hybrid sociology and history textbook chapters, such as "Dress and Costume," "The Anatomy of a Castle," and "Commerce, Trade, and Law in Contemporary Fantasy." Another example of worldbuilding's pervasiveness comes from *The Hobbit: The Desolation Of Smaug: Chronicles: Art & Design*, a book on the development and production of the second film of *The Hobbit* trilogy. In it, production designer Dan Hennah talks about the choice of color palette for the dwarven kingdom in which Smaug the dragon has made his lair:

> The chief influence for the unique palette of Erebor was a type of marble that comes out of a mountain in China. A beautiful dark green stone, flecked with rusty gold veins, it

> became the catalyst for the idea that perhaps the entire mountain core was a single chunk of jade-green marble, shot through with quartz veins. We imagined that before the true wealth of the Mountain was known the Dwarves might have explored a small cave at the base and found some quartz… We imagined that as the early Dwarven explorers and miners had worked their way along the first veins to be exploited inside the Mountain they would chisel little nooks in which to sleep, but being Dwarves they could not help but carve their iconography into the rocks…Over time, they gradually expanded this labyrinth of exploratory tunnels into cavernous halls - up, down, sideways, following the veins and creating a kingdom in which to live and thrive. (Falconer et al. 206–7)

Under the worldbuilding paradigm every detail must be fully and logically connected to the rest; thus, Hennah spins the history of an entire kingdom, a history that could never be deduced by even the most dedicated fan's speculation, from what color palette choice implies about geology.

Indeed, this rigor in providing details for how imaginary elements work with regard to real-world rules has its origin, exemplar, and apologist in the author John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. Tolkien became the origin and exemplar of worldbuilding (I will get to apologist in a moment) through what was technically one book released in three volumes in 1954 and 1955, and commonly known as *The Lord of the Rings*. Much could be said about the massive and inescapable cultural momentum *The Lord of the Rings* has gained (in the Anglophone world at least), first through its status as cult text, then through the massive media franchise blooming from the Peter Jackson films. However, when we look at the relation between Tolkien's works and the fantasy genre specifically, we find he looms overwhelmingly large not just because his works are well-written or resonant, but also because they were deeply innovative. Tolkien was the first to create an impression that the dragon-haunted and elf-inhabited *topoi* of his novel were

somehow as "real" as any real-life location the reader might read about in realist fiction, or visit on a real-life adventure. The essay "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Genre Fantasy Explosion" from *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* explains his achievement thus:

> ...what Tolkien did to give readers that necessary sense of belief in a Secondary World was to provide enormous historical and cultural depth to Middle-earth. LOTR came equipped with maps and appendices, but it also came after nearly forty years' work of sub-creation of the world which preceded the action of LOTR. Sometimes the depth is established simply by allusion. Aragorn says of Gandalf 'he is surer of finding his way home in a blind night than the cats of Queen Beruthiel' (303). Beruthiel is not otherwise mentioned in the trilogy at all. 'Who cares about the cats of Queen Beruthiel?' cried one early critic of Tolkien. Tolkien's insight was that most readers do, and it is a crucial insight into what is needed to make a 'full' fantasy world, as complex and intriguing, and hence as believable, as our own. (James 65)

This sense of depth that Tolkien invoked was something entirely new, prefigured only palely in satire such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), or the dry political mechanics of utopians, such as Étienne Cabet's *A Voyage to Icaria* (1840). In satires such as Swift's, invented realms exist primarily as funhouse mirrors, throwing back exaggerated reflections of what the satirist believes is already in our own world. Thus, the societies of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians are built around pettiness and harmony that are externalized in their difference of size. Likewise, Cabet's description of the art of his harmonious centralized utopia serves only to show its moral superiority and value to the public good, and its history is no more than a brief sketch of the horrors of the old day's tyranny and the glorious revolution that led to the current harmonious centralization. Tolkien, by contrast, wrote detailed genealogies for kingdoms of

elves and men, drew maps for the landscapes of unreal nations, and most famously formulated not just a language, but an entire family of related dialects, something few of the constructed language makers to follow him have accomplished. He created a world, not merely by naming a set of nations for his narrative to take place in, but by taking the unreal and working out how it would 'really' work. Sufficient distance and political isolation mean the Shire, the peaceful homeland where the narrative starts, has no news of the great wars east of them even while the dark wizard Saruman has begun importing pipeweed from them. The enmity between elves and dwarves has its root in both a specific historical decline in contact between the kingdoms of Eregion and Khazad-dûm and sharp cultural differences between the peoples. It is deep history and not mere choice of words that declares why Gondor, having lost its royal line, has a steward and not a king, and that same history, rather than fairy-tale coincidence, also explains why the lost heir to the throne Gondor is a bedraggled northern ranger. Middle Earth felt immediately and consistently real, and many authors that followed were determined to make their worlds feel real as well.

However, Tolkien went beyond simply providing a shining example for later authors to follow. I have said he played the role of apologist of worldbuilding, and this he did, not primarily through *The Lord of The Rings*, but in his 1947 essay "On Fairy-Stories." In this essay, Tolkien talked about fantastic fiction in general and made a defense of worldbuilding, which he termed "sub-creation," and which he saw in theological terms as the facility for creation given humans by God the creator. In the essay, Tolkien combatted the general dismissal of fiction of the nonreal (which still persists to this day). Probably the most famous passage is as follows:

> Inside [the fantasy story], what [the author] relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment

> disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (*Tree and Leaf* 57)

This closely prefigures the above quote from Winkle, and both contain the idea that the act of writing fiction containing nonreal elements obliges one to take up the task of explicating and making sure those nonreal elements are dealt with as realistically as possible.

The unique strength that worldbuilding lends to the genre is that it allows fantastic works to explore in complete seriousness any literary form realists can. Dynastic tragedy, plots of internal psychological conflict, enacted issues of race or gender, comedies of manners, detective stories, or just plain slice-of-life works are all made fully compatible with wizards and dragons, fair folk and changelings, Faustian bargains and blessed relics. Through worldbuilding, each of these tropes can fully rebuff the charges of contrivance or even escapism. Fantasy also makes it possible for these things to be writ larger and more intensely than realism as well, but the general trend is that the further the scale and intensity of action departs from realist literature, the more carefully the writer must worldbuild in order to make sure that daily clashes with monsters or wars lasting thousands of years coexist with a sensible ecosystem or a viable economy.

Despite the cultural momentum it has gained, and despite the strengths it offers the genre, this worldbuilding paradigm has not been universally embraced. Writer M. John Harrison has perhaps been the most passionate in his denunciations of worldbuilding, such as in his essay "Very Afraid":

> Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalises the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding

> numbs the reader's ability to fulfil their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done.
>
> Above all, worldbuilding is not technically necessary. It is the great clomping foot of nerdism. It is the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there. (Harrison)

A more moderate stance is taken by Péter Kristof Makai in the above-quoted "Beyond Fantastic Self-Indulgence," when he critiques the harm done to fantasy by what he describes as "[e]levating world-building into an art form of its own, removed from the concerns of mediality and narrative, where the story functions as a vehicle for the presentation of the world itself" (59). Both authors are reacting against the massive amounts of energy devoted to expounding as minutely as possible the material, historical, and sociological details of their worlds. As Makai succinctly puts it, "the knowability of the world is fetishized" (60). In fact, Makai views the increasing complexity and thoroughness of world-building in modern speculative fiction as a product of the commercial landscape in which such works are produced:

> This encyclopedisation is symptomatic of the degree to which commercially successful fictional universes have passed from being the backdrops of epic adventures to fully formed worlds, complete with historical timelines, copyrighted material cultures and hundreds of thousands of fans who demand pitch-perfect accuracy in these minor details for every new addition, every sequel and prequel. In fact, it could be said that fans no longer consume the stories and spectacles of individual media products, but rather, the inner consistency of fictional universes…World-building fiction is *ab ovo* a transfictional and transmedia phenomenon, spanning literature, films, radio, TV, comic books, analogue and digital games, virtual worlds, real-life encounters in fandom, material collections and more. (57)

It's true that all fiction but the most experimental takes place in some kind of ‘space,’ and even Makai says that “… all narratives require some world-building” (59). But in his article “More Thoughts on Worldbuilding and Food,” Lincoln Michel insists on the difference between world-building and alternative modes he calls ‘worldconjuring’:

> Different terms are often necessary for things that exist on a spectrum. What’s the difference between a pebble, a rock, and a boulder? The size cutoff between those terms is largely arbitrary, and yet it’s still useful to distinguish a pebble from a boulder. So too, I think, is it useful to distinguish creating a world through thematically resonant details and expecting the reader to fill in the gaps, and trying to flesh out a “real” version of a fake world that explores how changes to the world would “really” affect it. This is more than semantics. From a creative point of view, I believe it affects how one writes. (Michel)

Massimiliano Izzo goes even further in the other direction, by giving a name and a description to an alternative to worldbuilding, which he calls “Mythopoeia,” in his paper “World-building and Mythopoeia in Tolkien and post-Tolkienian Fantasy”:

> [Mythopoeia] employs a language rich with mythical resonance, to evoke a sense of wonder in the reader, tantalise him/her with glimpses of “unattainable vistas” (Letters 333), and provide access to – or at least a glance of – the land of Faërie, the realm of imagination. [Worldbuilding] leverages a variety of ‘scientific’ (including human sciences) disciplines to construct imaginary worlds that obey strict and reliable rules, the way the Primary World – as contemporarily understood – does. (51)

Izzo sees a unified alternative to worldbuilding, based in differences of use and style, relying on language and evocation. While I admit that stylistic forms can provide an alternative to

worldbuilding, I want to eventually argue that worldbuilding has no single opposite. Worldbuilding is but one of a diverse field of modes of the nonreal in fiction.

Tolkien himself complained about the demands made upon him by fans. As he wrote in 1956 to a reader:

> … many like you demand maps, others wish for geological indications […]; many want Elvish grammars, phonologies, and specimens […]. Musicians want tunes, and musical notation; archaeologists want ceramics and metallurgy. Botanists want a more accurate description of the mallorn […], and historians want more details about the social and political structure of Gondor; general enquirers want information about the Wainriders, the Harad, Dwarvish origins, the Dead Men, the Beornings, and the two missing wizards (out of five). (*Letters* 248)

However, as Renée Vink, in her essay "Tolkien the Tinkerer: World-building Versus Storytelling," argues, the incomplete state of *The Silmarillion* at Tolkien's death resulted in part from his continual efforts to make it more compatible with the real world scientifically and theologically, as well to make elements from *The Lord of the Rings* harmonize with the Silmarillion text (177). This is actually summed up best by Izzo in the aforementioned essay:

> This inability to harmonize the old mythical themes with a more scientifically acceptable cosmology might have been one of the reasons why he was never able to conclude the 'Silmarillion'. The tension between mythopoeia and worldbuilding in Tolkien's work explored here became even more marked in the works of the authors that came after him and who drew inspiration from his work. (40)

Thus, even Tolkien, the source and arbiter of quality in modern fantasy, could not match the worldbuilding standards that had been extrapolated from his own works.

Looping momentarily back from Tolkien the originator to the conventions of the genre he shaped, I want to note that there are, of course, modern works of fantasy that are conscious or unconscious exceptions to the worldbuilding paradigm. Izzo lists the best-selling authors Peter S. Beagle, Neil Gaiman, and Catherynne M. Valente, along with many others, as foregoing worldbuilding to "focus rather on myth-making" (31). To illuminate why I argue about the pervasiveness of worldbuilding in modern non-marginal fiction so urgently, I must step away for a moment from the definition of fantasy I gave above, and indeed from almost any definition of fantasy at all, in order to invoke the concept of the fantasy genre as a "fuzzy set". This concept was first articulated by Brian Attebery in his 1992 work *Strategies of Fantasy*. Under this framework, "genres…are defined not by boundaries but by a center." Thus, there are only core works which are very clearly fantasy and then an expanding category of works that are less and less similar to them. Later authors would embrace and expand upon this idea, as in John Clute's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) which coined the term 'water margin' to describe the works it examines which rest in debatable relation to the genre. Likewise, Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetoric of Fantasy* (2008) works with an insistently loose taxonomy, paralleling the notion of the 'fuzzy set,' based on the relationship between protagonist's/reader's point-of-view and the fantastic within the story. For Mendlesohn, four fuzzy and non-comprehensive subsets of fantasy can be articulated: portal fantasy, where the protagonist enters into and eventually becomes integrated into the fantastic; immersive fantasy, where the protagonist begins already fully integrated into the fantastic; intrusive fantasy, where the fantastic brings itself into the protagonist's space to be opposed or embraced, but never fully integrated by the protagonist; and liminal fantasy, where the fantastic or perhaps just the possibility of the fantastic is there but the protagonist never takes the key step of interaction. The interwovenness of these categories offers a helpful way of

identifying trends within nineteenth century fiction of the nonreal, without forcing sharp-edged genre divisions. With regard to the work of the Victorian novelist George MacDonald, and particularly his first novel *Phantastes*, we will see that Mendlesohn's insights into the loose but distinct world of the portal fantasy help to guide and aim our reading of that work as early and significant fantasy.

Here, it may be helpful, if perhaps obvious, to state that though Tolkien was enormously innovative and skillful, he did not invent fantasy, he merely practiced it very well. *The Lord of the Rings* was not the result of self-conscious attempts at literary innovation but instead a looking back at the past. As a linguist and an antiquarian, Tolkien based his magnum opus on works like the *Kalevala*, the *Prose Edda*, the vast corpus of Teutonic and Nordic folklore, and notably Beowulf, of which he is considered the most important modern critic. Sources like these, comprising myth, folklore, household tales, and, more controversially, religious narratives, are all what John Clute calls "taproot texts" in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Clute "Taproot Texts"). These works contain elements of the fantastic and have been (as the name suggests) drawn upon by later fantasists, and so they are key in forming the core that makes the whole "fuzzy set" of the fantasy genre possible. But they existed before fantasy as a genre existed. Fantasy can be said to have first truly come into existence as a genre alongside realism as a genre. Mendlesohn and James delineate this theory of the genre's origin very neatly in their *A Short History of Fantasy*:

> Fantasy and not realism has been a normal mode for much of the history of Western fiction (and art). Arguably however, fantasy as a genre only emerges in response (and contemporaneous to) the emergence of mimesis (or realism) as a genre: only once there is

> a notion of intentional realism, so the argument goes, can there be a notion of intentional fantasy. (7)

In the same entry on taproot texts cited above, Clute pins the date a little more precisely: "Only in the last decades of the eighteenth century, when (at least in the West) a Horizon of Expectations emerged among writers and readers, did a delimitable genre now called Fantasy appear." So, it seems that there were actually around 150 years between the birth of fantasy and Tolkien's accomplishment.

However, while the major taproot texts, such as the *Arabian Nights* or the *Prose Edda*, are at least fairly well known to any major reader or writer of fantasy today, the fantasy works from the birth of the genre through the long nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century and up to the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* remain remarkably little known. Despite the fact it was a period of great imaginative output and variety, names like William Morris (at least as a fiction writer) and Lord Dunsany remain obscure, and those like Hope Mirrlees and David Lindsay very obscure indeed.

One reason for this obscurity is the fact that fantasy was an even more marginal genre in this period than it is today. The birth of realist literature was not just the result of literary experimentation, it was part of a self-conscious reinvention of the western world known as the Enlightenment. Literary theory also emerged as a self-conscious discipline in this period in the light of the increasing volume of popular and amateur publications. If we are to think about fantasy before Tolkien, we must always keep in mind that fiction of the nonreal was an outlier, written mainly within children's works and against many powerful currents of thought regarding the necessity of realism and rationality in both literature and society. This is why fantasy often found both an outlet and an inspiration in the Romantic movement. While not all fantasy was

Romantic and not all Romanticism was fantastic, both shared a common interest in the works of children, the past, the natural world, and of course mysticism and the supernatural.

The parallel birth of fantasy and realism, and the diversity of early fantasy, are both closely linked to a second reason for modern obscurity of the pre-Tolkienian era, one close to the heart of this thesis. The marginality of fantasy meant that each of the authors mentioned would have had a strong (if not well-defined) reason to write fantasy in the first place. Gary K. Wolfe's essay "Fantasy from Dryden to Dunsany" examines 19th century concepts of the evolution of art and culture and proclaims that contemporary critics considered that "...[t]he fantastic…was inappropriate for an age of science and morality, and the values of realism came to dominate literary discourse, despite the fact that the Victorian age itself was one of the great periods in the development of fantasy literature" (10-11). The fantasists of this era were each attempting to do something that was at the very least difficult and often impossible to do within realist literature. Realism was not only the dominant form among their contemporaries, but it was also perceived as being the logically and morally superior form as opposed to the more fantastic forms of earlier eras. Each of the authors had a specific purpose for their work, and because it was these purposes that shaped these texts rather than the established and rule-bound genre that shapes contemporary fantasy, the fantasy they produced did not worldbuild. William Morris was attempting to emulate old forms of fiction throughout his romances. Charles Kingsley was attempting to synthesize science, morals, and hygiene in a single work when he wrote *The Water Babies* (1863). Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926) and David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) were both allegories, albeit each very different from the other. Morris' loose medievalist visions, Kingsley's bricolage of natural history and allegorical figures, Mirrlees' dislocated and ahistorical British market-town city-state, and Lindsay's just plain mind-melting strangeness all

make few attempts to maintain consistency or support the model of their world the reader has formed in his or her mind. And yet, these are not works of failed worldbuilding, they are works fully outside the worldbuilding paradigm, not just because they preceded it but because they followed completely other modes of invention. Worldbuilding fundamentally limits the ability of an idea, impression, or purpose to have full reign to shape its text. Particularly, it limits the ability of fiction of the nonreal to use older forms of story such as the fable, tale, or dream-vision, forms that the genre seems ideally suited to reexplore and reinvent.

The logical inference from this, and the point of this thesis, is that modern fantasy has been kept from a vast spectrum of possibilities. While worldbuilding has virtues, it is still fundamentally only one way of approaching the nonreal, and I believe that one can take the first steps towards recovering the others by studying the pre-Tolkienians. I particularly wish to turn my attention to a Scottish writer from the middle of the nineteenth century, George Macdonald.

George MacDonald is an important figure in many respects. First of all, his work was loved by some of the most important fantasists who followed him. Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, was a close friend of MacDonald and his family, and actually had MacDonald's children test-read early drafts of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* G. K. Chesterton spoke of MacDonald's children's book *The Princess and the Goblin* as "a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed" (Chesterton "George MacDonald"). Tolkien read the same book and its sequel in his childhood and said that MacDonald's eponymous goblins probably shaped the goblins in *The Hobbit* which were "not based on direct experience of mine; but owe, I suppose, a good deal to the goblin tradition . . . especially as it

appears in George MacDonald“ (*Letters* 178), though he was put off by several of MacDonald’s work later in life, due to being ”not naturally attracted (in fact much the reverse) by allegory, mystical or moral” (*Letters* 351). Finally, C. S. Lewis famously singles out his encounter with the writings of MacDonald, as a major turning point is both his life and imagination. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he speaks of the effect of MacDonald’s novel *Phantastes* on him in ecstatic terms: “…now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. [. . .] That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised…” (70–71).

Last, and possibly most significant, point of MacDonald’s importance is the way he lay close to the origin of several of the key taproot texts, to use the abovementioned term, namely the German literary fairy tales and mystic texts, as he was one of the first in the Anglophone world to be exposed to German Romanticism. As one of the early translators and hence earliest English-speaking readers of such writers as Novalis and E. T. A Hoffman, MacDonald encountered their radical genres such as the literary fairy tales known as *Märchen* and the half-allegorical *Bildungsroman* narratives, all of which he would metabolize into his later literary output.

The book that so deeply affected C.S. Lewis, and which I want to select as a type and representative of the imaginative possibilities of the pre-Tolkienians and, by extension, of fantasy outside the worldbuilding paradigm, is MacDonald’s first novel, *Phantastes* (1858). He would go on to write several original fairy tales with varying levels of mysticism stirred in, three works of children's fantasy, over thirty realist novels about Scottish village life, and near the end of his long life, *Lilith*. This last was his second work of fantasy for adults and was in a similar vein to *Phantastes,* though partaking far less in a Romantic and far more in a Theosophistic tone.

I have chosen to concentrate on *Phantastes* because it was his most influential work on later writers, is the closest to the German Romantic influences, and is perhaps the furthest from the self-consistent worldbuilding paradigm, while it still unwaveringly holds to its own unique form of self-consistency.

In my second chapter, I will be examining the broader context of German Romanticism before narrowing my focus to the specific forms and works that inspired *Phantastes* and to the influences that went into making it such a unique work. In my third chapter, I will examine several points where *Phantastes* fails to conform to, or actively violates, the worldbuilding paradigm, and I will argue that these instances all demonstrate not a failure of worldbuilding but the use of an alternative, non-worldbuilding mode of fantasy I call "aesthetic cohesion." In my fourth and final chapter, I will examine some of the non-worldbuilding modes of other pre-Tolkienian fantasists and look deeply at how Tolkien's invention of worldbuilding can be seen as the inadvertent result of synthesizing pre-existing modes. I want to suggest that there exists a vast spectrum of creative modes for modern fantasists to draw upon which lies currently untapped due to the hegemony of worldbuilding.

Chapter Two: The German Romantics and the Origin of *Phantastes*

The age of the Enlightenment, a period stretching from approximately the mid-17th century to somewhere around the end of French revolution, was a period not only of great innovation, but of possibly greater consciousness of that innovation. It was permeated by a belief in the superiority of the present to the past. To the minds of this period, the more recent past became the 'Dark Ages' between the greatness of the classical era and the greatness of the present, the transition marked not by a 'birth' but a 'rebirth' in the Renaissance. Amidst and against this long, slow, and powerful culture shift of the Enlightenment came a reactionary movement known as Romanticism. Stretching from roughly the late 18th to the mid-19th century, it is a movement whose precise shape is notoriously hard to pin down. In "Romanticism and Fantasy: A Prelude," an article in the fantasy magazine *Black Gate*, Matthew Sturridge describes the problem rather pithily:

> It is broadly true that Romanticism was a reaction against the neoclassical culture of the earlier eighteenth century, against the Age of Reason. But that reaction took many forms. You might think of the Romantics as points along a circle drawn around the Age of Reason. All of them have their backs turned to the inside of the circle, facing away from Reason, but this also means that they're all looking outward in different directions — if, sometimes, with overlapping fields of vision. (Sturridge)

These overlapping fields of vision do, however, form patterns in the Romantic movement which can be profitably studied. Among the most common of these elements in Romantic works were a near-universal concern with nature and with the power of emotions, and an interest in the ancient European and Medieval periods of history as much or more than the classical. Other currents in Romanticism included an interest in madness, children, the figure of the genius, a fascination

with ruins and extreme natural landscapes, and an interest in ecstatic religious experiences and in mysticism more generally. Particularly important to this thesis, the Romantic movement was intimately tied to the birth of fantasy in the western world. However, Romanticism helped birth fantasy as much through bringing both attention and some measure of legitimacy to earlier material that would inspire later fantasists as through any fantasy the Romantic movement itself produced.

As the Age of Reason saw more and more of the world become explicable in terms of the sensible and measurable, it increasingly associated things insensible or unmeasurable with the benightedness of a superstitious and fanatical past. This vision argued fundamentally that the world was always as we now know it and that our ancestors' vision of the world was the result of their own ignorance. Anything disproven by the scientific advancement of the Enlightenment era, such as alchemy, traditional nature spirits, or religious miracles, could not be a legitimate object of anything other than historical curiosity. In contrast, the Romantics were often very interested in the supposedly Dark Ages, and this interest in the past necessarily brought to their attention the mythic and folkloric beings and phenomena that figure so largely in premodern accounts of any kind. Romantics also tended to encounter and work with the fantastic through two other patterns. First, they explored the fringes of religious and mystic tradition, which, within the still-theistic paradigms of the Romantic era, pushed the boundaries of what was considered real and what not. Second, and possibly most important when we examine *Phantastes*, Romantics were concerned with dreams (also a prominent subject in the pre-modern texts they admired) leading to narratives of fantastic encounters and events.

Since I am taking MacDonald's novel *Phantastes* as my main point of study, I will have to step out of the Anglosphere in order to turn towards the novel's primary stylistic inspiration,

the Romanticism of Germany. German Romanticism had a more direct connection to the fantastic than we see in the Romanticisms of France or England, not only through a pervasive interest in the dream narrative, but through the interest in the traditional German *Mährchen*, or fairy tale. The interest in *Mährchen* that manifested itself most lastingly in Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (1812) was actually compiled in a large measure due to the recent humiliation of the various German states at the hands of Napoleon. In his book *Germany: Memories of a Nation,* Neil McGregor explores why the Grimms, who were professionally linguists, were moved to create their revolutionary collection: "…the Grimms' fairy tales were part of a German political and social renaissance, evidence that in their language and their folk tales the Germans had an identity that no foreign invader could eradicate" (117). The *Mährchen* would meet and fuse with the mysticism and religious fiction of the era to give German Romanticism a highly fantastic turn in the works of writers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Tieck, and Novalis.

The main reason that German Romanticism is so important to the work of George MacDonald, and to *Phantastes* in particular, is that he held a very different relation to the German Romantics than most of his contemporaries. Stephen Prickett, in *Victorian Fantasy,* states that "In the early nineteenth century Germany was immensely fashionable in Britain…Nevertheless much of the popular picture of Germany was based on sheer ignorance" (174). Prickett goes on to narrate how few people spoke German at the time and how little recent German work had been translated into English. The main literary product of Germany which people of the Anglosphere would have known were the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm (first translated into English in 1823, the year before MacDonald's birth, by Edgar Taylor), and hence there was a vague sense of Germany as a rural land of mystery: "For most people, Germany was

not so much the land of advanced thought as one of dark forests, romantic castles, and musical boxes" (Prickett 174). However, despite a distorted image of Germany looming large in the English (and by extension the Scottish) consciousness in MacDonald's day, it is unnecessary to focus on popular visions of Germany to gain insights into MacDonald's influence, since he was one of the rare people in the Anglosphere at the time who actually knew German and could interact directly with the recent German materials.

Living from 1824 to 1905 and educated at King's College at Aberdeen University, MacDonald over his lifetime wrote extensively on theology and Christian living, but only ever held one pastoral post, at a dissenting chapel in Arundel from which he was driven for preaching that provision was made for the heathens after death and for being "tainted with German theology" (Greville MacDonald 178-79). Remarking on this, Prickett states: "Given how far the Congregationalists lived up to their other name of *Independents* on matters of theology, this was a rare enough distinction" (159). His immersion in the literature of Germany was well known to those around him from early in his life and was held to have significantly influenced his worldview. Over his lifetime, the nonfantastic novels depicting often moralizing visions of Scottish life, which I have mentioned above, eventually became his main source of income for supporting himself, his wife, and their eventual eleven birth children, two adopted children, and one foster child. However, it is his comparatively few works of fantasy that have continued to fascinate both critics and readers, with their deep spiritual themes and vivid imaginative force. MacDonald's early encounters with German Romanticism are actually somewhat mysterious. His eldest son Greville states in his biography of his father that from 1842-43 his father was employed

> …in a certain castle or mansion in the far North, the locality of which I have failed to trace, in cataloguing a neglected library. That he did acquire intimate experience of this kind is obvious from his frequent use of such-like material in his fiction —notably in *The Portent, David Elginbrod, Wilfrid Cumbermede, There and Back, Donal Grant* and *Lilith.* The library, wherever it was, and whatever its scope, added much to the materials upon which his imagination worked in future years. (Greville MacDonald 72)

Greville's mention of *The Portent,* a novella by George MacDonald where the hero in a library comes upon "a whole nest of the German classics which seemed to have kept their places undisturbed, in virtue of their unintelligibility" (*The Portent*), is significant, and many scholars have speculated that it was in this unknown library that MacDonald first encountered the German classics. MacDonald would not only absorb these works, but he would also go on to translate and publish many of them in English.

If we are to look at *Phantastes* as a specific anti-form to worldbuilding fiction, then the most important aspect of MacDonald's influence is not the stylistic forms he had encountered, but his taking and running with the German Romantic theme of the dream narrative. In this genre, one German Romantic was a particularly key influence, Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known by his pen name, Novalis. Robert Wernaer's 1909 book on German Romanticism places him in the movement by saying "If Wackenroder was the native art interpreter of the school, Tieck the poet-actor, Fred. Schlegel the doctrinaire, Aug. Wilh. Schlegel the systematizer and cosmopolitan critic, Novalis was the Prophet and clairvoyant" (76). Even in a movement suffused with mysticism, Novalis stood out as the one with his head in the clouds. His works include the unfinished *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the journey of a young man through a long series of possible professions and attractions, containing a dream sequence of the mystic death

by drowning of Heinrich and his bride as well as a lengthy allegorical sequence narrating the journey of Fancy. This can be seen as a mystic response to Goethe's already fantastic *Wilhelm Meister*, both being in the German Romantic genre of the *Bildungsroman*, which I will discuss below.

The very first of MacDonald's own translations from German, indeed his very first publication ever, was a privately printed translation of Novalis' *Spiritual Songs* which he gave as a Christmas present to his friends and family in 1851 when he was 27 years old (Greville MacDonald 159). MacDonald would go on to translate more of Novalis' works over his lifetime. The central concern of Novalis's work was a form of Romantic Platonism which emphasized the constant evidence, in the beauty of this world, to a more real, more beautiful otherworld. To return to Wernaer's somewhat flowery prose for a moment:

> [Novalis] cannot be called a mystic in the ordinary sense of the word, for the common mystic believes himself imprisoned by the world of senses, seeking behind it a profound mystery, which is to reveal to him his true spiritual being and liberty, but to Novalis this sacred realm beyond was not an unsolvable mystery, but his original home, clearly perceived by him…. (78)

A key, and consummately Romantic, turning point in Novalis' life, was the death of his fiancé Sophie von Kühn when she was fifteen and he was twenty-three. The figure of the 'veiled maiden' as symbol and incarnation of the poetic inspiration would recur many times in Novalis' work afterwards (Wernaer 81), and we may perhaps see connections between this and the figure of the female guide and mentor who constantly appears in MacDonald's works. We can see Novalis' philosophical influence appear more explicitly even than it does in *Phantastes* in some of MacDonald's later fairy tales, such as the hope at the end of his story "The History of

Photogen and Nycteris" that death will lead to "a day as much greater than your day as your day is greater than my night" (*The Gifts of the Child Christ* 101), and the quest in the latter half of *The Golden Key* for the "country from which the shadows fall" (*The Gifts of the Child Christ* 166). Perhaps most important in the relation of Novalis to *Phantastes* in particular is Novalis's use of the image of dreaming and of waking, both in his fiction and his philosophy. Dream motifs are used heavily in both *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and his other incomplete work, *The Novices of Sais*. Novalis, in his writings, not only used the standard Platonist metaphor of dream and waking, but as a Romantic praised and was fascinated by literal dreams. Notable is the last line of *Lilith*, MacDonald's only other work of fantasy for adults, written 37 years after *Phantastes*: "I wait; asleep or awake, I wait. Novalis says, 'Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one'" ("Lilith"). MacDonald was clearly affected by Novalis' concern with dreams. It is, I believe, in MacDonald's attempt to work out the idea of a truly dreamlike narrative, rather than to directly embody Novalis' mystic philosophy in which life is already a dream, that the heart of *Phantastes* lies.

First, let me give a brief description of the text at hand. The protagonist of *Phantastes* is a dreamy young man of wealth. He comes into his majority on his 21st birthday and in a desk left by his father, he encounters a fairy woman who implies that she is his great-grandmother and tells him that the next day he will enter Fairy Land. She also addresses him with the Latin word *Anodos*, meaning either "pathless" or "ascent," which is the only name he is known by throughout the narrative. No other character in *Phantastes* is given a proper name, though several are named in the stories-within-stories that occur throughout the text. The next day Anodos awakes to find the naturalistic decorations of his bedchamber gradually shifting into the things they represent, in a scene praised by many critics for the intense sense of liminality and wonder it

evokes. He soon finds himself beneath a tree by the side of a stream, and he follows a footpath into the forest. From here, Anodos falls in love with a woman he liberates with song from a block of marble, is almost killed by the spirit of the ash tree and is seduced by the temptress of the alder tree. He then makes a foolish mistake, gaining him a shadow that leaches the enchantment from the world. Anodos then sojourns in an empty palace, and after sundry adventures and finally being freed of his shadow, sacrifices himself in the service of the knight who has married his marble lady. It is only after he is buried and his spirit ascends to the sky that he wakes up again in our world, having been gone three weeks, with his bedroom bearing signs of the transformation that brought him into Fairy Land. He ends by narrating the elements of Fairy Land that still seem to shine through his world and how he feels that **"**What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good" (185).

Phantastes is, of course, influenced from a multitude of directions. Its debt to the English fairy tale tradition is very clear, and strong influences from sources as diverse as classical mythology and Spencer's *The Faerie Queene* have been analyzed in works such as "Dryad Fancies and Fairy Imaginations in *Phantastes*" by John Docherty and "God Save The Queens: Interrogating 'Englishness' Through Allegory In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and George Macdonald's *Phantaste*s" By Haden L. Bell. Both authors bring out not only the similar motifs used in both works, but also similarities in the overall form of the common spiritual journey. MacDonald's debt to Spenser seems quite clear. The reason I've chosen to concentrate on the centrality of the German Romantic forms is not only because these English (and classical) influences also run through and inform his other works of fantasy, but it is in *Phantastes* that the

influence of the Germans is overwhelmingly strong, to a degree perhaps unique in English literature, as we will see in the coming paragraphs.

Dialing back from Novalis and towards the broader German Romantics for a moment, *Phantastes* partakes deeply in the form of the *Bildungsroman*, the narrative of a coming-of-age journey, almost always of a young man, which generally keeps allegory near to hand through an episodic structure of a protagonist encountering a wide variety of characters and possible paths to follow. In all these points, *Phantastes* seems to conform pretty closely to the standard *Bildungsroman* arc of a young man's travels leading to personal maturity. William Raeper, in his biography of MacDonald, goes as far as to suggest that "If *Phantastes* has a single source, it is surely *Henrich von Ofterdingen* by Novalis, and, just as that book takes the form of a quest, so *Phantastes* too is a quest, of an inward nature" (144-5). However, while the *Bildungsroman* was not always fantastic, *Phantastes* is soaked in magic, with frequent explicit and implicit references to English fairy tales. As such, it would seem to resemble another German Romantic genre almost as much as the *Bildungsroman*, that of the German Romantic *Mährchen*. Stephen Prickett places the *Bildungsroman* of *Phantastes* in contrast to the *Bildungsroman* of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, especially Anodos' persistent feeling of disconnection from the world after he has completed his journey as opposed to the much more bourgeois ending of getting the girl and the estate that Goethe depicts. Prickett ultimately argues that the metafictionality and the attention drawn to the artificiality of the text in *Phantastes* places it both within the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, and also outside it, as an ironic subversion of the same. In the next chapter, I will argue that the element of metafictionally actually reinforces the proximity to the dream-narrative/*Mährchen* genre. It is noticeable also that even in the highly mystical narrative of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis confines the nonreal elements to dreams and to stories within

the story. MacDonald might thus be seen as writing a *Bildungroman* with the fantastic content of a *Mährchen*, pushing beyond the specific forms he had encountered in his German Romantic reading, or perhaps towards a synthesis of them all.

Yet, beyond both the *Bildungsroman* and the *Märchen*, there is arguably a third genre in which *Phantastes* partakes, one which can be said to precede MacDonald even though he was the first person to write an example of it. Key to the discussion of both the form and theme of *Phantastes*, and indeed to any general discussion of the work, is the quote from Novalis with which MacDonald begins the book. It is translated by Prickett as follows:

> One can imagine stories which have no coherence, but only association of events, like dreams; poems, which simply sound lovely, and which are full of beautiful words, but which lack sense or coherence, or at most have single verses which can be understood, like fragments of the most varied objects. This true poetry can at most have a general allegorical meaning and an indirect effect like music. For that reason, nature is as purely poetic as a magician's room, or a physicist's, a children's nursery, a padded cell and a larder. [. . .]
>
> A fairy story is like a disjointed dream-vision, an ensemble of wonderful things and occurrences, for example, a musical fantasy, the harmonic sequences of an Aeolian harp, nature itself. [. . .]
>
> In a real fairy tale everything must be wonderful, secret and coherent; everything must be alive, each in a different way. The whole of nature must be marvelously mixed with the whole of the world of spirits; here the time of the anarchy, lawlessness, freedom of nature in its natural state, the time before the world, comes in. [. . .] The world of fairy-tale is a

> world which is the very opposite of the world of reality, and for that very reason is as thoroughly like it as chaos is to completed creation. (Prickett 173)

The first hurdle in interpreting this quote, and its application to *Phantastes* as a whole, is that Novalis is being purely hypothetical, thus leaving ambiguous not only how much any given work by him or his contemporaries, but also how much any true old *Mährchen*, might approach this description of "certain stories" and "a real fairy tale." In effect, if MacDonald was truly trying to create a work that conformed to Novalis' description, he was trying to create a work whose existence was at that point only theoretically suggested, rather than trying to imitate something that the German Romantics, or indeed anyone, had actually created.

Indeed, I want to argue that MacDonald was in some ways trying to out-German-Romantic the German Romantics, though perhaps he was merely trying to emulate them and it is only to later readers that he seems to have done one better**.** Examining *Phantastes*, I have come to conclusion that it is bound together tightly by a unifying mode of the fantastic which I term 'aesthetic cohesion.' The plot, at first glance, seems almost purely episodic, with Anodos' gradual maturation as he learns both wisdom and self-sacrifice (the shifts in Anodos' relationship to several female characters are key markers) as the main unity for the work as a whole. Though some critics have sought for greater allegorical meaning, MacDonald himself responded to early reviews of *Phantastes* with this slightly cryptic remark: "I don't see what right the *Athenaeum* has to call it an allegory and judge or misjudge it accordingly—as if nothing but an allegory could have two meanings" (Greville MacDonald 297). I argue that individual scenes, episodes, and encounters are not determined so much by an overarching allegorical structure as they are selected for their accordance with the aesthetic unity; namely, the overall aesthetics of the German *Mährchen*, the Novalisian dream-vision closely tied with the *Mährchen* and, I suspect,

with MacDonald's personal set of inner images (the work is rather more classical and less elementalist and folkloric than many of the tales of the German Romantics). A biproduct of MacDonald's attempt, with *Phantastes*, to go beyond the works that influenced it and write a true Mährchen/dream narrative/aesthetic work is that, even though the sense of Fairy Land as its own world is far more distinct than in some other pre-Tolkienian works, it violates modern rules of worldbuilding through working according to impressionistic, symbolic, literary, allusive, and metafictional rules, rather than an internal 'logic' differing from our world only in a few particulars whose effects must be spelled out.

Chapter Three: A Closer Look at *Phantastes*

I have written about the inspirations and structure of *Phantastes* in my last section, but let me reiterate briefly. I believe MacDonald, both in emulation of certain German Romantic forms of *Mährchen* and *Bildungsroman,* and in an attempted construction of the theoretical dream-narrative posited by Novalis, set out to create a narrative governed by 'aesthetic cohesion.' That is, the elements of the narrative, both in content and structure, are chosen in an attempt to make them all 'feel' the same through a mixture of impressionistic, symbolic, literary, allusive, and metafictional associations, all depending on the resonance of mood rather than the logic of rules and the strict following of their implications.

To this end, I wish to examine three different elements of *Phantastes*-- the use of Arthurian tropes throughout the novel, the scene with the knight and the girl begging for butterfly wings, and the two stories-within-stories that occur at the midpoint of the novel—and to explicate both how they violate standard worldbuilding coherency laws and how they instead maintain 'aesthetic coherence' with the rest of the book. Through these examples, I hope to show how a vivid and engaging narrative can be created apart from the demands of logical correctness and scientific exhaustiveness demanded by the worldbuilding paradigm.

The first element I wish to examine is the use of Arthurian stories within *Phantastes.* The relationship of these Arthurian romances to the events within the novel is complex, to say the least. MacDonald makes use of relatively few Arthurian symbols and motifs; instead, he creates what might be called a layer of meta-references. In *Phantastes*, there are several appearances of both stories and characters from the Arthurian legends, yet the relationship between Arthur and Fairy Land is never made explicit in a way suitable to worldbuilding. It is, instead, an expression of an attitude towards myth and narrative that runs implicitly though *Phantastes* as a whole. The

most notable and explicit point of intersection is near the beginning, when Anodos reads in the old woman's cottage from a book detailing a meeting between Sir Galahad and Sir Percival. The latter knight has encountered and succumbed to the temptations of the spirit of the alder tree. His armor has been struck with rust as a symbol of his shame, and its gradual cleansing by the blows of combat will serve as the mark of his atonement. In the next chapter, Anodos encounters for the first time a knight he will meet several times throughout the book, who asks him "'Hast thou ever read the story of Sir Percival and the' (here he shuddered, that his armour rang)—'Maiden of the Alder-tree?'" (41). This knight has identically rusted armor to the Sir Percival of the story and has just undergone an identical encounter with the lady of the alder. The knight departs with a warning against that same tree-spirit without it ever becoming clear, here or elsewhere in the book, if he is Sir Percival or not.

Anodos promptly succumbs to the temptations of the alder himself like the knight and like Sir Percival, though he has no armor to rust. Anodos' actions actually parallel the book read in the cottage more closely later in *Phantastes* when, having by diverse adventures become a knight himself, he begins to be full of prideful thoughts, "having even the unspeakable presumption…to think of myself (will the world believe it?) as side by side with Sir Galahad!" (160). Anodos is promptly confronted by a knight, just like the meeting of Percival and Galahad, except that, instead of paralleling Sir Galahad, this knight is identical to Anodos in all ways and is, in fact, his shadow given a physical body, who promptly imprisons Anodos in a ruined tower.

The point of all this is that not only Anodos, who is from a time period contemporary to MacDonald's and a dreamy reader of old books, but indeed all the inhabitants of Fairy Land, seem aware of King Arthur as literature, but whether the court of King Arthur actually occupies Fairy Land, and whether at least one character might in fact be the same knight related in tales, is

never resolved. Beneath this lies a more basic concern close to the heart of worldbuilding, namely, the precise relation of our world to the fantasy world. *Phantastes* is very much what is conventionally called a "Portal Fantasy," a story in which both the world as experienced by the readers and at least one other world exist simultaneously, and in which the hero moves at least once from one to another. Anodos' place of dwelling remains obscure, but one might presume from his ancestral mansion that he is a child of aristocracy and not merely wealth. His dwelling might be anywhere in Britain. There is no mention throughout the entirety of *Phantastes* of what exactly the relation is of Fairy Land to England (or if we get finicky about Arthurian origins, Wales). Furthermore, there is no mention of the precise relations of Fairy Land to the real world. Or, more precisely, there seem to be multiple relationships of Fairy Land as otherworld to the primary world and perhaps to the mythic Arthurian world, all coexisting freely. Arthur and his knights are a fiction that is known in both worlds, or rather, Arthur is a fiction in our world and Fairy Land, while also true in Fairy Land. Added to this is the fact that, in Chapter Seven, we encounter a farmer who has willfully blinded himself to the fact he is living in Fairy Land, suggesting that even after one has passed into Fairy Land as Anodos has, it is still possible to dwell in the 'real world' by denying and being denied by all things faerie. While there are many rigorously world-built works that deal with the realization of fiction and myth in the primary world (examples include the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *Thursday Next* series), the ambiguity of *Phantastes* frustrates almost any possible schema of worldbuilding rigor, based on this complex relationship of Fairy Land, the Britain of Arthur, and the Britain of Anodos. It could be that the Camelot legends from Anodos' Britain have transmitted themselves as fiction into Fairy Land while simultaneously transmitting themselves into reality in a separate Britain of Arthur that in turn has communication with Fairy Land. It could be that the Britain of Arthur is

the one transmitting the fictions to both Fairy Land and Anodos' Britain, while still being able to cross as reality into Fairy Land. It could be that Fairy Land contains the Britain of Arthur and has transmitted stories of these into Anodos' Britain which have come back into Fairy Land. Or it could be that the mark of the lady of the alder is the same for all men who wear armor. These are the kinds of speculations that would normally go on in forums regarding the worldbuilding of any modern work. But I believe that none of these explanations fully accounts for Anodos' encounter with the Arthurian myths as both fiction and reality, and thus I think we should look to illumine MacDonald's usage outside of explanations that take this rigorously mechanistic view of how fantasy works. Not only is there no thorough explanation of the rules of Fairy Land's relation to the Britain of Arthur (and the Britain of Anodos), but the actual usage throughout the book is an example of what the standard worldbuilding perspective would brand 'inconsistent rules,' and thus further brand a literary failure on MacDonald's part. But, as I said at the outset of the thesis, I believe worldbuilding is but one of many possibilities of the fantastic. These usages are not flaws on MacDonald's part, but stem naturally from the relation he implies not between Fairy Land and Arthur's Britain, but between Fairy Land and certain kinds of stories (no matter which world they are told in).

So, what exactly is the nature of this relation between Fairy Land and stories? John Pennington argues in "Phantastes as Metafiction" that the ambiguity of the mythic elements is part of the metafictionality with which MacDonald responded to the conventions of the Victorian realist novel:

> In his adult fantasies, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, he is also highly self-reflexive — his characters realize' that they are in a fantasy, that they are part of a fictional world — and this self-reflexivity manifests itself in structure as well as in theme. In *Phantastes*,

> specifically, MacDonald's fantasy approaches the metafictional, the meta-mythical; he uses other myths and interpolated fictions to construct his own fantasy world. (26)

However, I am considering *Phantastes* in terms of aesthetic cohesion rather than metafictionality. This is partially because, since I am considering *Phantastes* as having at least one counterform to the worldbuilding paradigm, I must address the aspects of the text that worldbuilding would concentrate on, namely, the world MacDonald portrays in the text, rather than his motivation or methodology in producing it. If I were to take my own term, 'aesthetic cohesion,' at its simplest level, I could perhaps say that Sir Percival fits because he is a bold knight questing through these forests, which is the exact right kind of forest for a knight to quest through. But I will take a slightly more complicated view and say that the peculiar aesthetics of *Phantastes* do not just harmonize with the aesthetics of the Arthurian romances (to the extent that MacDonald felt free to insert elements from them into his novel); rather, the 'feel' of the Fairy Land that MacDonald depicts makes it a place where it is appropriate for the boundaries between action and fiction to be blurred. The pattern seems to be that in Fairy Land fiction and reality freely flow into each other, so that whether one is in fact a person from a story known in the primary world, or one is simply retracing that character's steps exactly, is ultimately inconsequential. Nor does it seem to matter whether these stories are history or literature when encountered as stories (either written or oral) within Fairy Land. This is the land not only of deeds legendary in scale such as Anodos' combat against a trio of giants in the company of two princes who have taken him as a foster-brother, but legendary in their precise details. In MacDonald's aesthetic, both chivalric deeds and the telling and reading of tales figure prominently.

Ultimately, whether the knight has come from Camelot to Fairy Land or not, and by what winding paths, is secondary to the fact that the knight is capable of knowing the tale he has read in the book to be his own tale. In *Phantastes* this flow of fiction into reality and vice versa primarily works to underline the thematic similarity of the stories and their reality. As I will discuss in more detail in my third point, in *Phantastes* there is consistently a small set of types of stories that flow across—stories of tragedy and great deeds flow together, along with stories of love and redemption—in short, stories that flow into the theme of the story of Anodos which is at the center. The 'aesthetic cohesion' is rooted in the fact that the 'feel' of the stories within *Phantastes* and the 'feel' of the plot story of *Phantastes* are all on the same subjective register, dealing with similar themes and character arcs moving towards a sensibility of melancholy transcendence, transmitted through the encounter which mixes danger and love and usually leads to a bittersweet conclusion. We also see this is the poem of Sir Algovale (an obscure knight of the Round Table) told to Anodos by the lady of the house of four doors— this knight falls in love with a ghost-maiden, but, like Anodos in the fairy palace, violates the command to never touch her, and so loses her. We also see this emotional complexity in the two poems that Anodos composes for the two brother princes, which turn out to be prophetic of the tragic ends of the princes' respective ambitions to be reunited, the one with his lady and the other with their father. I will examine this fractal similarity of stories within *Phantastes* to the story of *Phantastes* when I examine the two books of the fairy library at the end of this section.

The second element I wish to examine is one particular scene in the novel, which I have chosen because it stands out as perhaps the most random and acontextual incident in the entire work: the scene with the knight and the girl begging for butterfly wings. This scene violates worldbuilding, not through any violation of rules, but through its apparent incongruity with the

rest of the book. Though everything involved in this sequence seems more random than anything else in a book full of strange and random happenings, it ultimately is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the text. This is true not just with the Fairy Land described in *Phantastes*, but with the overall plot and subplots we encounter, not through logic but rather through a common experiential shape found in the arc of each character of whom we have a clear portrayal. Hence, the girl is engaged in a process of metamorphosis which we can also see in every other major character in the book, and especially in Anodos.

Anodos first hears about the girl when he observes a conversation between his lady and the knight in one of his visions in the house with four doors. During the conversation the lady mentions a beggar-child who had come to the knight for help. When Anodos encounters the knight later on he asks him about the child, and the knight gives an account of how the girl had come to ask for his help. The knight tells Anodos of her request:

> What I can recall is, that she was sent to gather wings. As soon as she had gathered a pair of wings for herself, she was to fly away, she said, to the country she came from; but where that was, she could give no information.
>
> She said she had to beg her wings from the butterflies and moths; and wherever she begged, no one refused her. But she needed a great many of the wings of butterflies and moths to make a pair for her; and so she had to wander about day after day, looking for butterflies, and night after night, looking for moths; and then she begged for their wings. (171)

She then recounts to the knight how she found a place with many butterflies but also with “great men, made of wood, without knee or elbow-joints” (172) who knock her down whenever she tries to beg. The knight comes with her, on the way seeing “through the tatters of her frock—do

not laugh at me—a bunch on each shoulder, of the most gorgeous colours" (172). There are folded wings composed of butterfly and moth wings arranged like feathers on the wings of a bird. Finding the butterfly-filled clearing, the girl resumes begging but is knocked over by something unseen and the knight, striking with his sword at where he thinks it is, is suddenly able to see:

> This being, if being it could be called, was like a block of wood roughly hewn into the mere outlines of a man; and hardly so, for it had but head, body, legs, and arms— the head without a face, and the limbs utterly formless. I had hewn off one of its legs, but the two portions moved on as best they could, quite independent of each other; so that I had done no good. (173)

The knight faces the difficult challenge of fighting something where each severed piece keeps moving, but soon finds a solution: "I tripped one of them up, and, taking him by the legs, set him up on his head, with his heels against a tree. I was delighted to find he could not move" (174). We are told the girl is able to beg for wings for several hours until the knight takes her back home, but also that he could not make sense of what she tells him of her background afterwards. The knight cuts off the story suddenly after mentioning his wife, remembering too late she is a painful subject for Anodos.

This section has received attention primarily from scholars who wish to place an allegorical interpretation on it. John Docherty, in *The Source of Phantastes*, suggests that this scene may represent "how [the knight] assisted a striving young person against stupid didacticism, standing faceless wooden men on their heads when they threatened the imaginative integrity of the child" (49). Or, alternatively, Docherty suggests that it may be a vision of MacDonald's friend Charles Dodgson and his attitude of puzzled goodwill in his friendship with

MacDonald's children (49). Fernando Soto takes a slightly looser interpretation in *Mirrors in MacDonald's Phantastes* where he sees the wooden men as a "mirroring" of the lady of the Alder Anodos had encountered earlier. For Soto, they are united by being described as variously "rough," "formless," and generally crudely shaped, as well as similar in being "set up": "In the first of the above accounts, MacDonald conveys to the reader that the Maid of the Alder 'looked like an open coffin set up on one end.' This 'set up' reflects the clever method by which the knight first subdues a wooden man: 'I tripped one of them up, and, taking him by the legs, set him up on his head'" (32). The similarity in the readings of both of these scholars is rooted in the desire to look for allegorical or, at the very least, deep structural solutions to explain the strangeness of the episode. As with the earlier Arthurian perspective, I am more interested in how this scene fits within the other elements in the novel as MacDonald wrote it, rather than in speculating what external factors might have caused MacDonald to write it. The worldbuilding principles violated in this scene are simple to describe, as all elements involved not only seem totally random, but it can be easily argued that the scene is odd on a level different from any other incident encountered in the novel. Even the knight himself prefaces his description of the wooden creatures by saying "You see this Fairy Land is full of oddities and all sorts of incredibly ridiculous things, which a man is compelled to meet and treat as real existences, although all the time he feels foolish for doing so" (173). To all appearances it would seem to have been thrown in more or less at random. However, I still regard this scene as fully in keeping with MacDonald's use of exaggerated and loose symbolism feeding into a consistent pattern of characters in *Phantastes* undertaking tasks of personal transformation.

I will deal with the girl's task first, the wooden men second, and the knight's participation third. The butterfly wings are almost pure symbolism, mixed with pure whimsy.

The butterfly is a traditional symbol of inspiration and innocence, and thus suited to the innocence and suggestions of transcendence implied by the girl's task. The task itself, of begging wings to shape into greater wings with which to fly home, fits into the fact that many people in Fairy Land seem to be undergoing tasks of transformation. Examples of this include the knight's atonement, the beech's becoming a woman, the alder's slow decay, the ash's vain quest to fill himself, the shift in the maiden's life precipitated by Anodos' breaking her globe, and of course Anodos' own cycle of transformation, centered on escaping his shadow. The beggar girl's process of transformation through begging wings is unique in explicitly referring to another place she needs to get to, but her task is still of a piece with the transformative tasks of the other characters of the novel. It is significant that the character we see most transforming by a physical change is the knight having his armor cleansed. Counter to the 'internal consistency' required by worldbuilding concerns, each transformation process is unique to its character. For instance, the task of the girl, with its reliance on the kindness of others, physically undemanding nature, focus on bright colorful things, and whimsy bordering on absurdity (as dealt with below) is both symbolically and concretely fitting as the task of a uniquely innocent character.

Yet, stranger than the wing-gathering are the wooden men who oppose it. I find the significance of these creatures to lie in their extreme contrast with the task of gathering butterfly wings. I can perhaps hazard the idea that the wooden automata are meant both in their existence and their defeat to partake of, even if they do not as such symbolize, stupidity or banality. The knight even describes their movements as "stupid, persevering efforts" (174). They are strange things of wonder who are artificial in contrast to the natural butterflies, mindless and (literally) straightforward in contrast to the girl's surreal quest, the account of which is like "hearing a child

talk in its sleep" (174). But most of all they are a dark pointless absurdity in opposition to the bright and purposeful absurdity of the girl's task.

The final element of cohesion in this episode is the significance not just of the elements of Fairy Land we see on display, but the fact that it is the knight who participates in them. The knight, though he is an inhabitant in Fairy Land and used to its ways, does not believe the girl when she first comes to him and only goes with her because "though I could make nothing of her story, I could see she was a little human being in need of some help or other" (172). Even when he has seen her wings, he cannot see the wooden men until he strikes the first one by swinging at the air where he thinks it is. The whole episode is permeated by a need for trust in the face of absurdity, and to this need the knight proves himself fully equal. Helping the beggar girl is part of the knight's journey as well, a test of his trustingness and willingness to seem a fool for the good, and thus the account takes on a 'feel' in contrast to the deeds of might we have seen him perform previously, which is as much a part of what happens in this particular section of *Phantastes* as the journey of the girl. In Fairy Land, things happen which are inexplicable, but nothing happens that is not fully a part of the process of transformation of each person involved.

The fact that both girl and knight are involved in tasks related to spiritual development is in keeping with the various processes of transformation we see characters undergoing throughout novel. The absurdity of the elements involved with the girl's task and the opposition to her task are in keeping with the innocence and whimsy of the girl performing it. Finally, the call for aid presented to the knight in absurd terms as a test of his goodness of heart is in keeping with the moral development we have seen him undergoing. What at first glance seems a strange and arbitrary scene proves deliberate in its very strangeness. To say that nothing is random in *Phantastes* would be to attribute allegory to it, a path I do not wish to follow. Nonetheless, I

assert that MacDonald made sure each individual element coheres, so that *Phantastes* functions as a single aesthetic unit.

Last of all, I wish to look at the two stories-within-stories that comprise chapters 12 and 13 of the novel, ultimately hoping to show that these strange digressions into what seem completely different genres from the main text are in fact closely tied to the main themes of the novel and deeply illumine why MacDonald chose to write fiction of the nonreal. There are several stories-within-stories in *Phantastes*, but only two are told in prose, the two books which Anodos reads in the library of the fairy palace and which he relates "in such a feeble, fragmentary way as is possible to me" (76). While the Arthurian elements are puzzling in the nature of their intertwining with the text, and the episode of the butterflies and wooden men is puzzling in its (apparent) tonal shift from the rest of the book, the two stories-within-stories sitting almost at the exact center of the novel are objects of interest for their (apparently) almost complete independence from the text that surrounds them. The first is the story of a 'planet further from the sun' where differences include a reflective sky, seasons that take decades to change, opaque water, women having wings rather than arms, and most notably, children being found rather than conceived or born. The second is the story of a young student of Prague named Cosmo von Wehrstahl who purchases an antique mirror and discovers and falls in love with an unhappy seeming woman who appears within the reflection of the mirror each night. Both are unconnected to the Fairy Land through which Anodos wanders, but they can be said to be part of his wanderings in a way because the books have the virtue of causing him to experience their contents directly:

> [I]f the book was one of travels, I found myself the traveller. … Was it a history? I was the chief actor therein. … With a fiction it was the same. Mine was the whole story. For I

> took the place of the character who was most like myself, and his story was mine; until, grown weary with the life of years condensed in an hour, or arrived at my deathbed, or the end of the volume, I would awake, with a sudden bewilderment, to the consciousness of my present life, recognising the walls and roof around me, and finding I joyed or sorrowed only in a book. (76)

As stated above, since they are framed as Anodos' recollection of books he read in the library of the fairy palace, they are thus both allowed to be almost totally divorced from other events and people within the novel. However, their place both in the fairy palace and in the middle of the novel signals that they still belong to the numinous nexus of the entirety of Fairy Land. One could perhaps dismiss them as simply MacDonald wishing to include some previously written fiction that he though thematically appropriate, but I wish to show that their cohesion with the rest of the novel goes beyond thematic appropriateness. I hope to eventually show how the relationship of these works to the whole of *Phantastes* illuminates not only what *Phantastes* is as novel, but what it might have been as well.

I am far from the first to notice the centrality of the placement of these stories and to puzzle over their significance. Scholar Susan Howard begins her article "In Search of Spiritual Maturity" by saying that that "Of all of the many seemingly unrelated episodes in George MacDonald's adult fairy tale, *Phantastes*, one of the most puzzling is the narration by Anodos of two tales that he reads during his sojourn in the fairy palace" (280). Adrian Gunther, in his article "The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*," gives perhaps the most positive vision of them, as he waxes eloquent about how he believes the story of the other planet gathers up MacDonald's whole theory of fantasy, saying that what this first story

> [C]onjures up is a multitude of interpenetrating co-existing worlds, 'an interradiating connection and dependence of . . . parts of creation.' The text, in its confusing interweavings of different realms, of different historical periods, of different levels of fiction and literary genre, even of the different roles filled by Anodos himself, becomes an embodiment of this concept. Anodos, as his spiritual awareness develops, becomes increasingly conscious of it as a truth. Each world of form in its miraculous dance is struggling towards its next embodiment, a process which ultimately leads to the still centre which generates and controls this great dance of forms. (50-51)

While I do not consider these stories embodiments of the whole of *Phantastes*, I do see patterns linking them to the whole of *Phantastes*. Centrally, both deal with themes of love and death which are to be found throughout the novel.

To give a brief summary of each, in the story of Prague the lady in the mirror is unable to see or communicate with Cosmo, who grows obsessive and jealous in his love without realizing it. He finally uses the academic occultism he had studied to summon her to him physically but hesitates when she asks him to free her by breaking the mirror, since he doesn't know if he will see her again if he does. In his hesitation, he is struck down and when he emerges from the fever that ensues, the mirror is gone. After a long search he discovers it to be in the possession of a decadent fellow student and the actual breaking happens offscreen, with the reader only seeing the lady freed and meeting Cosmo as he succumbs to wounds sustained in accomplishing the task.

The story of the other planet contains an initial description, partly in verse since Anodos says he cannot recall whether it was in verse or prose, of the aforementioned elements by which the planet differs from earth and particularly how the conditions and season in which an infant is

found affect their personality and (for the women) the coloration of their wings. The narrator then tells how in relating to some men and women of this world about his own he was forced ”in the vaguest manner I could invent” (81) to tell of birth upon earth. “Immediately a dim notion of what I meant, seemed to dawn in the minds of most of the women” (81). Some are offended, one flees, and one wanders off and is found dead the next day. He goes on to say that many here die after forming an indescribable longing which drives them into solitude, and that such can be the result from a man and woman looking into each other’s eyes too long, though he speculates that afterwards there will be babies born on earth who “if, when grown, they find each other, it goes well with them; if not, it will seem to go ill” (81). He concludes with a passage in verse telling of a maiden who, born when winter had just begun, despaired of seeing spring in her lifetime and set out in search of it in other parts of the globe, eventually dying alongside her first snowdrop. Like the stories of chivalry I discussed earlier, these two stories-within-the-story both deal with the subject of love and tragedy, but each has a more specific structural similarity to *Phantastes* and to each other, which I will address below.

Considered from a worldbuilding perspective, these books within the fairy library create fewer problems than do the previous two elements. The same issue about why Fairy Land has stories about King Arthur could be raised about why the fairy library has stories about Prague. In his founding study of MacDonald’s work *The Golden Key*, Robert Wolff expresses a dissatisfaction with the use of the real world in Cosmo’s story. He states explicitly that:

> This short story---very effective in itself---seems out of place in the library of the fairy palace. Dealing as it does with Prague, a real city, and with earthly people who have real names, it suits less well the supernatural *mise-en-scene* of fairyland than does the myth of

> the distant planet. MacDonald would have been well advised to omit it from *Phantastes* and publish it separately. (78)

Wolff is focusing on the harmony of subject rather than the harmony of impression, rather like a worldbuilding critic. He concludes that fairy palaces shouldn't have stories about the real world without extensive explanation. Likewise, though the story of the other planet is somewhat too brief for very rigorous worldbuilding analysis, there is one particularly glaring hole, as it is stated that each maiden will only ever find one child, yet there is no indication that the population is being cut in half every generation. Both stories stand in very different, but equally grievous, violation of the worldbuilding paradigm. My concern, however, is just as much to justify the presence of the stories, though they appear to be large and, at first glance, pointless narrative digressions, as it is to demonstrate their unity with the text of *Phantastes* as a whole.

First of all, though the stories are very different, we see the parallel elements of separation between lovers who do not love rightly, and of that separation reconciled by death. In the first, the separation is the absolute barrier of the mirror, and the love of Cosmo is distorted by the excesses of his passion, making him hesitate in releasing the lady at the risk of never seeing her. Likewise, it is his embrace of the self-sacrificial love he had lacked before that leads him to brave the student he knows is his match in swordsmanship in order to destroy the mirror. In the tale of the other planet, the separation between all the men and women of the world is a purely emotional and social one caused by the deficit of romantic love in their natures. Attempts to bridge this barrier leads to death and perhaps (for Anodos qualifies that he knows nothing of whether these people are actually reborn on earth), through death, union. These themes are very much a part of *Phantastes* and might even be said to constitute its plot, as Anodos slowly and through various incidents learns to love his marble lady rightly. If we are to speak of barriers

transcended, it is interesting that the four times he encounters the lady in the book, there is some form of separation between them. The first is the block of marble that he breaks through song. The second is both the barrier of invisibility shrouding her in the fairy palace, which he rightly lifts through song, and the rule of the palace to "touch not," which he violates and so loses her again. The third time he sees her is in the vison in the house with four doors, where he is the one who is invisible to her, and where he is not able to break through and let her know he is there. From here, imprisoned by his shadow, then released by the woman he had wronged, he decides finally to devote himself to his lady by serving the man she loves instead of him, and he dies acting upon the wisdom that the morally pure knight still does not possess. The final time he meets his lady is after he is dead, and he is finally kissed by her as his spirit possesses a flower she has picked. As his spirit flies away, he reflects that "I knew now, that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another" (181). Both of the stories reflect the two central elements within the main development arc that Anodos undergoes, namely, a love that has gone wrong in life finally coming right in death. Thus, each of the stories serves as kind of miniature versions of *Phantastes* reprised.

However, the fact that each reprises and prefigures the story of Anodos is not the sum total of their significance, nor does it fully explain MacDonald's choice of two very different stories rather than just one. The second form of significance I find in these stories is that the story of the other planet and the story of Prague lie on either side of *Phantastes* in terms of how fantastic they are. The story of Prague is closer to the genre of the occult tale, ghost story, and gothic yarn than *Phantastes*, and it importantly takes place in a very real city into which the supernatural elements only ever intrude in a highly specific, highly limited way. Even the vaguely sketched history of the central device of the mirror can be plausibly assumed to be a

product of the same occultism with which Cosmo summons the lady. Likewise, however fantastic and dream-like *Phantastes* is, the almost surrealist, metaphysical fiction of the story of the other planet goes far beyond the novel in which it is contained. The story of Prague would in modern terms be a work of urban fantasy where the magic is left mostly in the background but, where shown, is fully consistent. The story of the other planet is a kind of quasi-proto-science fantasy where science and philosophy, both already outdated in MacDonald's day, meet to create a world with little rational cohesion. Yet though each is different from *Phantastes* and each very different from the other, the two stories and their containing novel all lie along the same spectrum of the fantastic.

The story of Cosmo keeps the fantastic subordinate to the realistic setting of Prague, with magic confined to the curse in the background and to Cosmo's occult academics. The story of *Phantastes* itself has magic incidents occur on a regular basis but all within the setting of stable trees and grass, rocks and rivers. Finally, the story of the other planet literally changes the color of sky and sea and uses magic in place of reproduction. Each serves as an illustration of an alternative form dealing with the same themes. Each, in carrying a similar plot, similar themes and a similar participation with the nonreal as a central element, shows that *Phantastes* did not have to be the way it was. MacDonald might not have desired to write a full-length occult historical novel or metaphysical science fantasy, but he does illustrate that the particular aesthetic governing *Phantastes* is not the "end all, be all" of fantasy. Ultimately, MacDonald shows that the aesthetic cohesion displayed in *Phantastes,* the binding together of a work about the fantastic by principles of theme and feel, does not necessarily mean making something that looks like *Phantastes.* By transfiguring *Phantastes* to the extremes we see in the two internal stories, he shows that one could apply this to any work dealing with the nonreal. MacDonald suggests an

entire alternative paradigm, then shows how it can be stretched to encompass the whole genre of fantasy.

Phantastes is a novel that freely incorporates real-world legends as both internally real and internally fictional, it features images both whimsical and absurd, and it goes on long digressions to tell stories both incongruously sourced in the real world and just plain incongruous. Most of all, it is a beautiful novel, perhaps wondrously so, but seems to be ultimately a *bricolage,* a mixture of whatever elements MacDonald might have been drawn to in his heady German-Romantism-inflected youth. Yet, it is still a story written with not only enormous originality and beauty, but also tight authorial control in its writing. While I do not think it an allegory, I will insist that each element that occurs has been carefully chosen for resonance with all the other elements, and that much of the effect the novel has upon readers is the result of an extremely subtle web of linkages: impressionistic, symbolic, literary, allusive, metafictional, and more. These all gather together in a tale where a whole universe of variety may be encountered and yet have the same subtle feel from beginning to end.

Chapter Four: A Brief Look at Some Other Fantastic Possibilities.

I begin my conclusion by hoping that I have successfully shown that George Macdonald's *Phantastes* is a work that does not conform to the demands of worldbuilding, yet still manages to be self-coherent in how it approaches the nonreal. However, in my introduction I spoke not just of *Phantastes*, nor even of MacDonald's whole corpus of work, but of "the pre-Tolkienians." For reasons of space, I have only been able to examine *Phantastes*, but the fantasy writing of the Anglosphere would continue after *Phantastes* with great creativity and even greater diversity. The writers who followed MacDonald each worked in modes of the fantastic not bound by worldbuilding, but not bound by 'aesthetic cohesion' either. I believe that through studying not just MacDonald but also the other pre-Tolkienians, we may see that beyond both worldbuilding and 'aesthetic cohesion' lie the infinite vistas of possibilities that fantasy truly holds. I would like to use this conclusion to ever so briefly sketch out some of those possibilities, before finally looping back to Tolkien, and showing how what he invented in worldbuilding wasn't quite so divorced from what had come before as it may seem.

We might perhaps start with a close family friend of the MacDonalds, Oxford University mathematics professor Charles Dodgson, who actually had George MacDonald's children test read the story which he would later publish under his much-better-known pen name, Lewis Carroll. The two *Alice* books (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [1865] and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* [1871]) are among the most famous works of nineteenth century English literature. Even those who have never read them usually know of their pun-and-poetry-laden style, plots filled with sudden shifts in size and location, and a tendency towards lines of correct logic that lead to profoundly absurd conclusions, all of which define the sub-genre of fiction of the nonreal which the works both created and exemplify:

Nonsense. Most of the characters in the two novels are household names and the books have spread into a massive metatextual phenomenon across countless works and franchises through allusion, adaptation, or outright appropriation. This goes double for modern fantasy, and fantasy works appropriating or reinventing the Alice books, such as Frank Beddor's *The Looking Glass Wars* (2006)*,* Tommy Kovac's *Wonderland* (2008), and Andy Weir's *Cheshire Crossing* (2019), are well-represented in modern publishing. However, none of the *Alice*-inspired-works I have encountered in post-Tolkienian fantasy have actually attempted to emulate the thorough-going Nonsense genre, with the pun-based characters and events, the sudden bursts of poetry and bewildering shifts in space and scale. This seeming lack of ambition on the part of modern fantasists is made all the curiouser by the fact that the genre of 'Alice imitation,' characterized by just such attempts to capture Carroll's works in style rather than particulars, was very popular for the half-century after the publication of the *Alice* books. *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* states that "Approximately 200 such works have been identified, most produced between 1869 and 1920" (Sigler). The fact that modern fantasy has shifted its approach to the *Alice* books might be traced to the fact that the Nonsense style in which they were written does not lend itself particularly well to the logic of worldbuilding. Indeed, Carroll's works often center upon attacking logic itself, following lines of seemingly correct arguments until they lead to profoundly absurd conclusions, as well as including random unique happenings that have no precedent or explanation, occurring on nearly every page. However, the Nonsense that Carroll writes is not merely an anti-form, doing whatever it wants whenever it wants. Carroll might be called a postmodernist a century too early. He called upon the nonreal for the purpose of calling the real into question. The lines of perfect logic used to ultimately produce absurdities illustrate just how reasonable absurdities can sound. The puns and language play made literal remind us

how often the words for things substitute for the things themselves in our reasoning. Finally, the shifts in size, shape, and space are all there to throw us off balance, to keep us from making any kind of assumptions about Wonderland, and thus perhaps to make us aware of the assumptions we already have made about our own world.

Charles Kingsley was an acquaintance of the MacDonald family and a man of many contradictions: he was crusader for the rights of the poor and an anti-Irish bigot, a Christian preacher and early devotee of Darwin, a writer of works both moralistic and erotic. His opinions and character seem to have been about as heterogeneous as his only work of fantasy, *The Water Babies* (1863). The book begins with grim social commentary as it introduces its abused child chimney sweep protagonist, Tom, but then the narrative moves into lessons in the natural history of aquatic animals after Tom drowns and becomes a four-inch-long gilled creature called a water baby, and ends with Tom's Dantescan journey to the North Pole to redeem the soul of his cruel sweep master, all liberally sprinkled with lessons on hygiene, spirituality, Darwin's still-novel theory of evolution, and the stupidity and perfidy of the Irish. As a work of fantasy, *The Water Babies* cannot be said to have aesthetic coherence like that of MacDonald, is too purposeful and pedantic to be called Nonsense, and certainly does not conform to the factual logic dictated by worldbuilding. If one was going to analyze its subgenre in modern terms, *The Water Babies* can be said to partake of miniature world fantasy throughout much of its text, animal fantasy though most of the middle, and spiritual allegory sporadically at the end. As a counter-form to worldbuilding, it is best described not in terms of any structure but in the authorial motivation to which structure is blithely sacrificed. That motivation is, in a word, pedagogy. The book is stuffed, riddled, and textured with everything Kingsley thought might help a child succeed in the world; satires of quack medicine are bound up with the importance of scientific curiosity,

entomology lessons on the caddis fly are used to convey the vanity of following fashion trends, and the moral truism of cleanliness of body leading to cleanliness of soul is put in wherever he could fit it. The book employs the nonreal because it could teach all it had to teach thicker and faster that way. Fiction intended to educate children, especially nineteenth century works, are usually thought of as exemplifying a dark age of dullness, doom, and gloom for children's literature, but while *The Water Babies* is often rambling, sometimes frightening, and occasionally offensive, it is in no way dull. Kingsley was bending fantasy to a seemingly unfantastic purpose, but in doing so he did not dull or repress the fantastic, but instead created perhaps the most vivid, and certainly the one of the most ebullient, works of fantasy in the whole of the English language.

Throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s, the writer, poet, socialist, and interior decorator William Morris wrote what are called his late romances, several fantasy and historical novels, strongly diverging from the utopian socialist themes of his early novels. In these late romances, Morris tried to emulate the style and themes of the high medieval romances, a period to which he looked for the political and cultural hope of England. Significantly, these works are probably the strongest prefiguring of worldbuilding before Tolkien. *The Well at the World's End*, published in 1896, best exemplifies this. Tracing the journey of young prince Ralph of Upmeads in search of the eponymous source of wisdom-granting water, the novel describes Ralph's encounters with multiple culture groups in various relations of alliance and of conflict with each other; some of these tensions he takes part in, and some come to their resolution without him. Though elements such as the fully realized secondary world and the dynamic set of factions at play (and even suggestions of a pre-history underlying them) are all present in this novel, its strong hint towards what would be called worldbuilding is subjugated to the patterns of Morris's original sources, the

tropes and even logic of Medieval romances. Morris is seeking always to summon an echo of an older form rather than to originate a form in the present.

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany, most commonly known simply as Lord Dunsany, wrote voluminously over his long career, with fourteen novels, dozens of plays, hundreds of short stories, and three autobiographies. He is probably best known for his major contributions to long form fantasy in his two earliest works of prose, *The Gods of Pegana* (1905) and its sequel *Time and the Gods* (1906), as well as his later novel *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924). The former two explored mythopoeia in its purist form, tracing a pantheon of his own making from their origin in the dreams of Mana-Yood-Sushai to their final destruction by Time. The latter is an on-the-surface simple tale of a prince venturing into faerie to gain a wife, finding her, losing her, then having her return, which actually carries deep themes of the relation of the fantastic to the mundane and of time to eternity. Dunsany's prose is the main thing that makes those few who know his work love it deeply; his style is described by John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as "an ultimately *sui generis* mix of rhythms and vocabulary from the King James Bible and Celtic revival poets and tale-tellers like William Butler Yeats, plus the Fin-de-Siècle ambience of *The Yellow Book*" ("Dunsany, Lord"). It is how they are described, as much as what is described, that gives his ruined cities, old gods, and borders made of sunset their inimitable sway over the reader. The writer C. L. Moore famously told H. P. Lovecraft in a letter dated January 30, 1936: "No one can imitate Dunsany, and probably everyone who's ever read him has tried" (Moore). Dunsany's work is full of invocations of worlds, and the breadth is extraordinary, as he may have created more places even than Tolkien. However, these places are only ever evoked in passing, and almost none are fully described. Even those that receive special attention, such as the River Yann or the city of Perdóndaris, are conveyed to the reader as a

series of fragmented images. Dunsany ultimately shapes his fiction of the nonreal not through any attempt at coherence in the wonders he describes but by making and keeping them wondrous through an unparalleled mastery of wondrous language.

Hope Mirrlees was a young heiress who hung around the fringes of the Bloomsbury Group. Her *Paris: a Poem,* printed by Virginia Woolf, is considered one the forerunners of modernism. Among non-modernist poetry circles, she is probably better known for her third and last novel and only work of fantasy, *Lud-in-the-Mists* (1926). This work traces the semi-allegorical tale of the city of Lud in the land of Dorimare, a city of bourgeois respectability in deep denial that the border of Fairyland is only a few miles away and that Fairyland's addictive fruits are consumed by its underclass. The respectable but vaguely haunted mayor of Lud, Nathanael Chanticleer, is slowly drawn into the mystery of how the fruits make their way to Lud in the processes of his quest to save his son from their effects. He eventually ends up rescuing first his son and then the daughters of Lud's elite from the clutches of Fairyland, and finally leading the forces of Fairyland back into Lud to bring back the reign of the not-entirely-safe-or-moral forces of Fairyland that had once ruled in the city. The twin worlds of Dorimare and Fairyland together form a picture of the mundane and wondrous aspects of life. The mundane Dorimare will never be able to control the extraordinary Fairyland and will never be able to be whole without it, but the extraordinary Fairyland is a force that comingles extremes of good and evil and which can never truly be trusted. Dorimare seems to be located in a fully secondary world, receiving mercantile goods from such locations as the Cinnamon Isles and the Amber Desert, with said amber sold in its streets by pygmies of the north. Yet the customs and mannerisms of Lud are meant to be about as English as possible, just as they are meant to be as middle class, respectable and blind to wonder as possible. The point of *Lud-in-the-Mist* is not the

adventure in the otherworld, exciting and harrowing as it is in the novel, but rather the subtle interplay of the two principles of wonder and the mundane, embodied in Fairyland and Dorimare dwelling side-by-side. *Lud-in-the-Mist* is, if not an allegorical novel, at very least a symbolic one.

David Lindsay's A *Voyage to Arcturus* was published in 1920, 18 years before the synthesizing of LSD, a fact that becomes increasingly important to keep in mind as one reads it. The main character, Maskull, is introduced with his friend Nightspore when they attend a séance, without backgrounds ever being provided for either of them. A man named Krag arrives and breaks the neck of the person who the medium has just materialized, then invites Maskull and Nightspore to go with him to the planet Tormance orbiting the double star Arcturus. After they set off naked in a transparent spaceship from the top of a ruined Scottish tower, Maskull awakens alone on Tormance with a tentacle growing out of his chest and a psychic transmission-detecting organ on his forehead. The journey northwards to view the second sun that follows defies description, but his adventures among the thinly spread inhabitants of Tormance involve forced transformation of people into trees, seafaring trees with eyes, the apparently feminine force of gravity overcome by 'male stones,' and Maskull accidently or purposefully causing the death of anyone who travels with him for any length of time. I have estimated that the organ on his forehead changes function approximately once every two chapters; one allows him to hear the singing of all living things, another to perceive things only in their utility to him and to project his will to kill or subjugate others, another to see the demi-urgic fragments of spirit trapped in gross matter, etc. The novel ends with Maskull, now reunited with Krag, dying and being reborn as Nightspore, seeing the struggle of spirit against matter in the universe, and then setting off to an unknown location with Krag, who is both the creator of the world and the force of pain in the

universe. The novel is at least partially allegorical, each of the zones of the planet expressing a unique school of thought and philosophy. Some of the characters represent very clear philosophical systems, such as the Nietzschean inhabitants of Ifdawn who go about 'sorbing' (absorbing) the personalities of those weaker than them. Others are slightly less clear, such as Earthrid, who every night plays an entire lake as an instrument, but whose music kills all those who hear it. But each character in each region can be fit into some school of thought and way of life. Likewise, we can roughly identify the philosophy of the book as a whole as a peculiar species of 1920s theosophical Manicheism, taking place in probably the most mind-meltingly vivid material world to grace the fiction of English. The world here is meant to bewilder, to indulge in technicolor extravagance, not just to externalize the allegorical vision of each particular region of the planet, but to express a fundamental sense of difference from our own that serves as a complement to the nothingness and avoidance that is the final truth in the novel's dark and spare ending.

Worldbuilding is one way of approaching the nonreal. Against it lies no single alternative but a vast, perhaps infinite field of possibilities. I consider this point key as I finally loop back to Tolkien and take one last look at how the worldbuilding mode that made *The Lord of the Rings* so revolutionary came into being. Key, because I believe that the worldbuilding of *The Lord of the Rings,* and indeed, the existence of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, were something of an accident, as the novel emerged from the meeting of two different modes of the nonreal used in two different works, the literary fairy tale of *The Hobbit* and the mythopoetic imagined history of *The Silmarillion.*

Tolkien did not originally intend to write a novel set in a fully immersive world. What he saw as his life's work from 1914 onward was to write what would eventually become (or fail to

become, depending on one's interpretation of its complicated publication history) *The Silmarillion*, a work framed as a narrative of history, told in a mythological style very far from the novelistic form. Indeed, many *of The Silmarillion's* most important early iterations were written wholly in poetry. What he did more incidentally in the early 1930s was create *The Hobbit,* a separate literary fairy tale for children, pulling some elements from his epic background project, but not very many. After *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, Tolkien approached his publisher Stanley Unwin with a manuscript of *The Silmarillion* and it was only after this was summarily rejected and he was asked to write a sequel to *The Hobbit* in the form of a novel that the features of *The Lord of the Rings* as we know it took shape. Tolkien himself summarizes this well in his 'Foreword' added to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

> …I did not go on with [the planned sequel for *The Hobbit*], for I wished first to complete and set in order the mythology and legends of the Elder Days, which had then been taking shape for some years. I desired to do this for my own satisfaction, and I had little hope that other people would be interested in this work, especially since it was primarily linguistic in inspiration and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of 'history' for Elvish tongues.
>
> When those whose advice and opinion I sought corrected little hope to no hope, I went back to the sequel, encouraged by requests from readers for more information concerning hobbits and their adventures. But the story was drawn irresistibly towards the older world, and became an account, as it were, of its end and passing away before its beginning and middle had been told. (xv)

I have already mentioned Renee Vink's article *Tolkien the Tinkerer* in my first chapter, but her look at the stir *The Lord of the Rings* made even at the time of its publication and how that reaction shaped the concept of worldbuilding, seems particularly relevant here:

> The conclusion seems warranted that the way many readers reacted to *The Lord of the Rings* played a crucial role in the endeavor of aligning the published works and the unpublished texts. It looks as though this type of reaction, perhaps in combination with the rejection of *The Lord of the Rings* as serious literature by a number of mainstream critics, clinched Tolkien's status as a world-builder. (182)

Also in my introduction, I cited *On Fairy Stories*, the essay which lays out many of the ideas which are made flesh in *The Lord of the Rings*, and probably *the* founding work of criticism in the creation of the worldbuilding paradigm. As it turns out, *On Fairy Stories* was actually written very early in the drafting of the *Lord of the Rings*, rather than during the earlier drafting of *The Silmarillion*. But what exactly is my basis for saying that it wasn't until *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien enters into the worldbuilding mode?

The fact that pretty much all fantasy in the years since its publication has been shaped by *The Lord of the Rings*, which was itself created in order to expand the world of *The Hobbit*, obscures how innovative a work *The Hobbit* was when it was first published, but also how much it participated in works that had gone before it. Two of the works Tolkien explicitly cited as his inspiration were MacDonald's *Princess* books*, The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883). But these literary fairy tales, here with a satirical edge poking fun at the genre convention already established as much by Andrew Lang as by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, were part of a sprawling and well-stocked genre by the time of *The Hobbit*. The latter was itself a literary fairy tale designed to parody and deconstruct many of

the tropes of traditional fairy tales and, to a lesser extent, the examples of epic fantasy (such as those created by William Morris) that already existed. It is this subversion of traditional fairy tale motifs which makes clear why Bard, a secondary character just introduced, is the one who takes on the traditional crowning accomplishment of killing the dragon, and why the treasure hoard causes a war rather than serving as the hero's reward. And, of course, the figure of Bilbo is the quintessential non-hero. (Sadly, only a brief glance at the Peter Jackson films will show how much the original modes in which *The Hobbit* was written have been forgotten).

The Silmarillion was far more unique but still within at least two preexisting (if only afterwards recognized) genres: that of mythopoeia, dealing in the creation of original mythologies, and that of imagined histories. I have mentioned an example of mythopoeia above in the early writings of Lord Dunsany, but this impulse could also be found much earlier and extensively in the works of William Blake. The imagined history has had elements suggested in the utopian novel tradition (such as the history of the eponymous island in Étienne Cabet's 1840 novel *The Voyage to Icaria*) and it particularly flourished at the end of the 19th century, boosted by the emergent science fiction tradition in such works as H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Both these genres come very close to worldbuilding but can be said to lie outside it for the same reason that *The Silmarillion* was originally rejected for publication: though technically fiction, both read far more like nonfiction. *The Silmarillion* contains stories within it, but as a complete work it tells a story in more or less the way that the Old Testament can be said to tell a story as a complete work, only in the indirect fashion of the collective tragic rise and fall of an entire people.

I have held to the theme of the diversity of the non-worldbuilding modes of the nonreal, yet for purposes of space I have consistently singled out George MacDonald as a point of

reference for the fantasy of the pre-Tolkienian era, conceived in these non-worldbuilding modes. Intriguingly (though perhaps appropriately), I think we might see a vision of the evolution of Tolkien's approach to fantasy, and, through that, of the evolution of fantasy as a whole before and after Tolkien, in his changing attitudes towards MacDonald. Tolkien was notoriously tight-lipped about his influences, but we do know that in 1954 he wrote to Naomi Mitchison saying that the Goblins of *The Hobbit* "are not based on direct experience of mine; but own, I suppose, a good deal to the goblin tradition . . . especially as it appears in George MacDonald" (*Letters* 178). Humphrey Carpenter listed MacDonald's 'Curdie' stories among Tolkien's "childhood favorites" (167). But there appeared a sharp change in his approach to fantasy as Tolkien repudiated his earlier liking for MacDonald's work. Tolkien attributed his earlier liking to "a highly selective memory [which] had retained only a few impressions of things that moved me, and re-reading G[eorge] M[acDonald] critically filled with me distaste" (Hammond 570). Most famously, when he was asked to write a preface to MacDonald's long tale *The Golden Key*, Tolkien said of MacDonald, "He probably makes up his tale out of bits of older tales, or things he half remembers, and they may be too strong for him to spoil or disenchant. Someone may meet them for the first time in his silly tale, and catch a glimpse of Fairy, and go on to better things" (Carpenter 275). The reasoning behind this was apparently his dislike of the particular mode of the nonreal in which *The Golden Key* was written: "I am not as warm an admirer of George MacDonald as C.S. Lewis was; but I do think well of this story of his . . . I am not naturally attracted (in fact much the reverse) by allegory, mystical or moral" (*Letters* 351). It is of course a common event for us to find our childhood literary loves flawed as we grow more discerning, but it is telling that Tolkien, writing in 1964, long after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings,* should find himself in such deep repudiation of the mystical allegorical mode.

Despite the fact that I have been writing about the damage Tolkien did to the possibilities of fantasy for this entire thesis, I cannot find it in myself to repudiate *The Lord of the Rings* in the way Tolkien did *The Golden Key* (indeed, I can't repudiate it at all, as it is a masterwork that I would never wish out of the canon of literature). Nor can I even quite find it within myself to repudiate worldbuilding. In my pocket right now are story notes for my design of an infinite city and how to solve its parking problems. Yesterday, I found myself returning to my idea for a book about uneasy identity politics between human and vampires in the wake of a successful counterrevolution against the human-supremacist post-vampire-empire regime. Flipping through my commonplace book, I found some speculations on ecologies where every single animal is a variation of griffins. Worldbuilding is fun, worldbuilding is easy to share, worldbuilding gives a boost in the struggle for legitimacy that fantasy still fights for today.

And yet I still am compelled to wonder: what if Stanley Unwin had decided to try to publish *The Silmarillion* circa 1937? Would fantasy still be considered the purview of children and mystics? Would medieval studies have far fewer scholars than it does today? Would the lack of a popular cultural work about killing irredeemably evil orcs have created a more peaceful society? Or would there be more people tracing the foibles of society in the language of folklore like Mirrlees? Or making lands of brain-bending brilliance like Lindsay? Or bringing back long-dead forms and worlds like Morris? Would there be more people relying on words alone to trace ships of silver and cities old as time like Dunsany? Would there be more people bending the laws of sense and logic to show the fragility of our world like Carroll? Or teaching the younger generation with unabashed manic eagerness for all things like Kingsley? Would there even, perhaps, be people trying to express the inexpressible half-felt feel of dreams by taking a pathless young person and having them walk into Fairy Land as MacDonald did?

We cannot know what would have happened if these accomplishments had not been eclipsed and obscured by Tolkien's accidental masterpiece. But we can do two things. We can tell others of these works and the possibilities they represent, and we can try out writing in the style and spirit these and other possibilities for ourselves. The pre-Tolkienians aren't going anywhere, and the world of books is always waiting for something new (even if it's really old).

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