Doorways to Fantasy

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Scholars have not yet agreed on a critical apparatus with which to examine fantasy[1], but most agree with Tolkien on a definition of what fantasy is – it is the creation of another world different from our own.[2] Eric S. Rabkin sees in the world of fantasy a reversal of the rules and structures outside the text.[3] Similarly, W.R. Irwin conceives of the fantastic as pervading literature with a "systematic representation of what we generally think antinatural or impossible."[4] Tolkien argues, however that this "sub-creation" is not a total reversal of the world outside the text, but an echo of it.[5]

Because the fantasy writer must make the finite and the fantasy world somehow touch or correspond – if only by echo – he often becomes a creator of doorways, of entrances from our time and place into other unique worlds. These doorways to fantasy may be formed by wardrobes, or paintings, or even by rabbit holes. What, if anything, are common features of these "doorways" in the works of fantasy writers like Alan Garner, Madeleine L'Engle, William Mayne, C.S. Lewis and Susan Cooper? And where do Canadian writers such as Ruth Nichols and Catherine Anthony Clark set their entrances into fantasy worlds?

Since Alice fell down the rabbit hole, we have been encountering doorways into other worlds in children's literature. Alice fell through space to be liberated from time in Wonderland. W.R. Irwin has expressed the fantasy writer's frustrations with such limitations in *The Game of the Impossible.*

> . . . But even within the habit of conformity a restiveness is lurking; many of us are ever hoping to break out and be as gods. When liberation occurs, the result may prove one of those fulfilled quests of human understanding that provide the bright spots of history.[6]

This sense of liberation may be both physical and spiritual. A freedom from time and space, such as Alice feels when she floats down the rabbit hole, can be the physical manifestation of a sense of liberation through spiritual or emotional growth. This fourth-dimensional quality has elsewhere been associated with nonsense literature.[7] And yet there are doorways similar to Alice's rabbit hole in other fantasies. Often they are undefined; frequently they lead out of time and space, fulfilling Irwin's conditions for the antinatural: "who among us has not wished . . . that apples might sometimes fall upward through the earth's atmosphere, that we might talk

with Socrates or Ben Franklin, that we might meet a platitude walking down the street?"[8]

The stone circles and tombs of prehistoric peoples provided the folk of Ireland with entryways into timeless faeryland. George MacDonald's Curdie had to climb the tower and walk out into space as he entered a room with no floor in order to approach the Princess.[9] The fourth dimension, a combination of reversals of the rules of time and space, often occurs at entrances into fantasy worlds. Thus Alan Garner defines the doorway into *Elidor* as an undefined place, unidentifiable by function within any time sphere:

> You opened the door here, no door opened in your world . . . The finding is chance. Wasteland and boundaries: places that are neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there – these are the gates of Elidor.[10]

Likewise Malebron appears as a violin-playing tramp, thought to be blind at first; a figure undefined by time or place, undefined by clothing or function.

In *Red Shift* Garner defines the complex entryway into other time spheres by the relationship of his hero and heroine to the constellation Orion. It is as if the shift to other times occurs under Orion's influence, according to the relativity of time:

> "There's never 'now' " said Tom. "Delta Orionis may not exist. It isn't even where we think it is. It's so far away, we're looking at it as it was when the Romans were here."[11]

The fact that the same star and the same places on earth recur in all three time-spheres adds depth to the experience of the novel. The times explored are those of social change. Garner draws parallels between the withdrawal of soldiers from Roman Britain, the anarchy of civil war, and contemporary society in England.

Garner's use of other time-spheres and worlds to explore human problems does not border on satire. His is the quest for liberation described above in *The Game of the Impossible.*[12] His characters have that restiveness ascribed by Irwin to our knowledge that "we are finite creatures, limited in attributes and potentialities."[13] William Mayne, C.S. Lewis and Ruth Nichols also use doorways into fantasy to liberate their young heroes and heroines from finite problems. C.S. Lewis's Jill, Edmund, Eustace and Diggory suffer emotional stress before entering Narnia. What they face there helps them to understand the limitations of our own time-sphere. Ruth Nichols' Linda has been unhappy and suffering stress before the

opening of the story of *The Marrow of the World*. Likewise the heroes in *A Game of Dark* and *The Jersey Shore* by William Mayne experience emotional turbulence and overcome it by their battling with problems in other time-spheres. The doorways into these fantasies are as undefined as those in *Elidor*. C.S. Lewis's wardrobe in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* is an unused discarded piece of furniture in an empty room. Again, *The Jersey Shore* is a place of mists and shifting sands, where the young hero cannot distinguish the houses in the shifting heat of the flat undefined plain.

Other authors, rather than confine time and space to the doorways into fantasy, explore four dimensions within their worlds. Rather than reversing the rules and structures of nature, such writers try to recreate it imaginatively: Madeleine L'Engle does so in *A Wrinkle in Time*. She uses Einstein's Theory of Relativity and her own imagination to explain the nature of space-time travel.[16] Certainly such works as *Red Shift* refer openly to relativity. In his work *Relativity: the Special and General Theory*, Einstein explains the discovery of a red shift:

> A few years later Hubble showed, by special investigation of the extra galactic nebulae ("Milky Ways"), that the spectral lines emitted showed a red shift which increased regularly with the distance of the nebulae . . . Hubble's discovery can therefore be considered to some extent as a confirmation of the theory [of expanded space].[15]

The modern fantasy writer has here taken the extra-textual world of science and has made it essential to the "fantastic" process.

The writer's ability to see our own world reflected in another space-time continuum may not be an altogether accurate use of Einstein's theory of relativity, but to read Susan Cooper's description of the test given to the Old Ones in *The Grey King* is to experience the relativity of time and space imaginatively:

> They were no longer where they had been. They stood somewhere in another time, on the roof of the world. All around them was the open night sky, like a huge black inverted bowl, and in it blazed the stars, thousand upon thousand brilliant prickles of fire . . . He and Bran were not standing in a timeless dark night observing the stars in the heavens. It was the other way around. They themselves were observed. Every blazing point in that great depthless hemisphere of stars and suns was focussed upon them, contemplating, judging . . . . The long flaring tail of the comet moved gradually out of sight, down over the horizon of their nameless world and time.[16]

Throughout the five stories which comprise *The Dark is Rising* Susan Cooper expands our imaginative concept of time and space.

Perhaps in the space age one should limit Rabkin's concept of the "groundrules of the extra-textual world" to encompass those qualities which man experiences as a confining force on his life; qualities of restraint and conformity to physical laws which exist on earth but are not operative in space. The balance between the world of the impossible and the world of the credible can be upset by such writers, for their imaginative "play" with the concept of relativity allows us to feel freed from the finite limitations of time and space, while at the same time they are telling us that such freedom may be possible in a "real" scientific sense.

The characters in the fantasies of Catherine Anthony Clark and Ruth Nichols are freed from the finite limitations of time and space. However, unlike some of the other fantasy writers examined here, these authors use water rather than air or space as the medium for liberation.

Lakes and rivers, never seas, constitute the doorways into fantasy for these two Canadian writers. In both *The Golden Pine Cone* and *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* Catherine Anthony Clark animates the waters with Indian Spirits and imaginary creatures who are essential to her characters' entrances into the outer world. In *The Marrow of the World* Ruth Nichols makes a similar use of the face of the lake to enable her characters to move between this world and that of the fantastic.

Water, like space, is a place where the world of the credible and the impossible meet. Space, I have suggested, fascinates fantasy writers because of its timelessness and is made even more interesting by scientific theories of relativity of matter in the universe. Water has similar properties of timelessness and changeability. Symbolically water has been identified with change such as rebirth through baptism. Our associations with it are complex. The lake mirrors our present reality of mountains, skies and trees, while it is also considered to be representative of the subconscious mind. Hence it is a union of time present and time past. Furthermore, the lake is a universal, but particularly Canadian, image of peace and beauty. It is often associated with golden memories of childhood vacations free from schoolwork, with time for imaginative play. Like Alan Garner's undefined place as a doorway into another world, our entrance to the "fantastic" in these Canadian stories is undefined by time or place. These lakes could be found anywhere and at any time.

In *The Golden Pine Cone* the pine cone transforms the children's view of reality. Their fantasy adventure begins, however, when the pine cone falls into the lake beside which they live. To rescue the cone Bren and Lucy have to enter the lake and meet the Pearl Folk. They must face the Lake Snake. Finally they emerge into a new place and time. They are on a beach, after

their sojourn in the lake, in the other world:

> Lucy sat up on the sand. "I wonder what day it is? - We seem to have been away for years. And where are we?" she remarked.
>
> It was then that they saw that they were on a strange beach; the mountains looked different (p. 62).

The landscape has been changed by their journey through the lake to a new time-scheme. It is only the same night when they return, after many adventures, to their parents' house.

Catherine Anthony Clark's other world is one in which the forces of Nasookin, the evil Indian Giant, are aspiring to overcome Tekontha, "The Spirit of this country. She rules over all this land, lake and air. If Nasookin finds the Pine Cone her power to restrain his wicked mischief is destroyed. She cannot control him." Thus the children must join the fight against the elemental forces of evil. These forces, and those of the good, have been given Canadian Indian names. They rule a land of lakes, hills, mountains and forests, of ice and snow. The doorway into their fantasy world through the lake is unique and meaningful.[17] Symbolic of cleansing and of rebirth, the lake holds the entrance into the children's adventure in which they purify the land of the evil Nasookin. Likewise Nasookin is reformed, reborn, by the children's kind actions: "The giant did not need his bear's-teeth necklace now. He did not need anything but his happy life in the forest with someone to love, who loved him in return" (p. 177).

When we read Clark's *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* the image of water is again paramount. The children, Anne and Rick, ride up to the lake at the top of the mountain. This is a lake which has a strange reputation for ill-luck. Once at the lake the children are surrounded by drizzle and fog, only to discover that they have lost the pathway back to their own world. Instead, they have entered a world of spirits, of Indians and medicine men, of pioneer women and lost Indian villages.

Water is a recurring theme in the fantasy world of *The Hunter and the Medicine Man*. The guiding spirit of this adventure is Luk-shin, "Power-of-the-Waters", who tells Anne:

> We are not so dreadful as we look, I and my sachems. With heat, with tides, with airstream and storm, they weave the magic cycles of water around the spinning world. I rule the waters and so I rule the earth under the Great Spirit, Master of All (p. 91).

It is Luk-shin who provides the lake horses which carry Anne across to the Island of the Dead. Likewise he saves the Chief of the Sisquans, together

with his family and village. He is a powerful totem, imaginatively conceived riding his lake horses and diving below the waves, falling in rain and streaming in waterfalls. Through Luk-shin and the children, particularly Anne who becomes renamed "Water-Flower" (p. 91), the other world is again cleansed of the evil medicine man. Anne and Rick return to their own time and place.

The lake is again a doorway in the quest of Linda and Phillip for *The Marrow of the World.* They see a mysterious city under the water:

> Near the surface the water was pale, translucent brown deepening to amber, through which the black shapes of minnows darted. And only a few feet down, the walls began. They were crumbled walls, their thickness mellowed to gold by the rippling water-light . . . Then Phillip's head broke the surface, and his fingers gripped the boat's side. "Get over there to balance it while I climb back in." . . .
>
> Then he said: "There's nothing there."
>
> "What?" The word was a whisper.
>
> "I said there's nothing there. There are no walls. The bottom's smooth: not even any weeds" (p. 5).

The way into fantasy opens on the face of the lake later, at night, when the children see a merman. They lose control of their oars and realize that they have entered into another time-sphere: " 'You've led us wrong: we're not where we thought we were' . . . . Where the boathouse should have been, a water-channel now flowed into the lake." Once the children reach land their adventure in another world and time begins.

In *The Marrow of the World* Nichols draws upon the image of mysterious, quiet Canadian lakes and on the concept of past lost civilizations, like Atlantis. Into a world in which chaos threatens to rule, the children must travel in order to find the marrow of the world, to save Linda from her own disturbed witch-like nature and to return securely to their own civilization. Perhaps now they understand the reasons for consideration, love and kindness, for civilizing principles, in their own world.

The elemental evil in this novel is present in the form of Ygerna, the witch. However, Nichols does not simply externalize evil. Linda must resist not only Ygerna but her own evil within, for she is descended from the same witch-mother as Ygerna. Both Linda and Phillip find the inner strength to fight the battle with evil, to destroy it, and to make good choices about the emotional security of their future lives.

To enter the other world of lost kings and water people, of dwarves and wizards in *A Walk out of the World* by Ruth Nichols, Judith and Tobit

stroll along a deserted road. It could be any road. It is a place of transition, a country road near to the city. Lonely and quiet, forgotten by the city, the wooded road is a place where the children play free from adult supervision. Imaginative transformations take place here all the time:

> When they played beneath these trees, Tobit and Judith would have seemed like two different children if there had been anyone there to see them. They laughed and ran and shouted to each other. Their parents would have been amazed (p. 10).

There is one place along the road where the maple trees cease and the woods begin. These woods have the qualities of wildness against which children have been warned in fairytales like "Goldilocks" and "Hansel and Gretel." At this point on the road the children literally walk out of the world in the "fantastic" world beyond.

The children, now lost in the wood, move to a stream "as cold as glass" (p. 18). Judith leans over it for a drink and only then is made aware of the other world she has entered. A strange boy and a dwarf prevent her from drinking the poisoned water. She stares at these inhabitants of another world as "the water [drips] from her cupped hands" (p. 19). Water is still present as we enter the fantasy.

Water folk are on the side of the new King Brand and fight against the evil wizard in *A Walk out of the World*. King Brand lives in a palace built on stilts in a lake where he will be safe in an element with which he is allied. The children live at this palace which is called the Lake House. Here at the Lake House they learn of their quest to destroy the wizard and the evil powers he holds at his command. It is a desperate quest, but the water people of Riánan guide the heroine, Judith, on her journey. It is Riánan who eases the burden of the quest:

> There was a touch cool as running water on her shoulder: Riánan was bending over her. And for an instant she could see Riánan's face as clearly as any other, a face of compassion and of sorrow far older than her own. His touch refreshed her, and as she straightened she suddenly felt at peace with her own grief (p. 76).

Riánan, like Luk-shin, is a figure of hope in the beleaguered world the children have entered.

Both Ruth Nichols and Catherine Anthony Clark use fresh water in their fantasies as entrances to other worlds and as a cleansing force, ruled by spirits who are animate representatives of the impossible in fantasy. It would appear that the doorways to the "fantastic" are often made credible either by the use of an undefined place which has lost its function in time or

by the physical properties of air or water. The Canadian fantasy writers, while focusing on water as a medium for time travel use the same traditions as other fantasy writers examined here, balancing the credible with the impossible, using doorways which are undefined by location and time, frequently manipulating space, as well as time, when the fourth dimension is part of the transition to the "fantastic." And the doorways keep on opening.

NOTES

[1]S.C. Fredericks, "Problems of Fantasy," *Science Fiction Studies* #14, Vol. 5, Part 1, March 1978.

[2]Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London, Unwin Books, 1964), p. 36.

[3]Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 42.

[4]W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible* (Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 4.

[5]Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London, Unwin Books, 1964), p. 50.

[6]W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, p. 3.

[7]Elizabeth Sewell in *The Field of Nonsense* tells us that the fourth dimension is one of the elements of nonsense literature.

[8]W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, p. 4.

[9]G. MacDonald, *The Princess and the Curdie* (London, Penguin), p. 64.

[10]A. Garner, *Elidor* (London, Collins, 1973), p. 39.

[11]A. Garner, *Red Shift* (London, Collins, 1973), p. 39.

[12]See above, p. 2.

[13]*Op cit.*, p. 3.

[14]Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York, Dell, 1962), p. 77, explains:

> "Okay," Charles said. "What is the first dimension?"
> "Well - a line."
> "Okay. And the second dimension."
> Well, you'd square the line. A flat square would be in the second dimension."
> "And the third?"
> "Well, you'd square the second dimension. Then the square wouldn't be flat

anymore. It would have a bottom, and sides, and a top."

"And the fourth?"

"Well, I guess if you want to put it into mathematical terms you'd square the square. But you can't take the pencil and draw it the way you can with the first three. I know it's got something to do with Einstein and time. I guess maybe you'd call the fourth dimension Time."

"That's right," Charles said. "Good girl. Okay, then, for the fifth dimension you'd square the fourth, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so."

"Well, the fifth dimension's a tesseract."

[15]Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (New York, Crown Publications, 1952), p. 134.

[16]Susan Cooper, *The Grey King* (New York, Atheneum 1977), p. 84-86. This is the fourth book in a sequence of five entitled *The Dark is Rising*.

[17]It is in *The Magician's Nephew* that C.S. Lewis uses pools of water to act as doorways to other worlds. These pools are found in the wood between the worlds.

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