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Crossing that Great Frontier: Transformative Reading in *Phantastes* and C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*

Rebecca Langworthy

In his introduction to *George MacDonald: 365 Readings*, C.S. Lewis claims that after reading MacDonald’s *Phantastes* he knew that he “had crossed a great frontier” (xxxiii). By moving beyond this frontier Lewis was transformed and his imagination “baptised” in a conversion experience (*Surprised by Joy* 180). The transformative ability of *Phantastes* is an important aspect of the text. The transformation which Lewis undergoes and which MacDonald’s writing initiates is both a personal and aesthetic one. *Phantastes*, as an early example of adult fantasy, challenges its readers to engage in the act of reading in a new and transformative way. Such a transformative was internalised by Lewis, not just in his conversion account, but also in his own fantasy writing.

This paper will attempt to show how the adult reader is encouraged to engage imaginatively with the text of *Phantastes*. It will then examine how MacDonald’s approach to the reader and the act of reading influenced C.S. Lewis, through examination of his account of conversion to Christianity in *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis’ work parallels *Phantastes*, using the concept of transformative reading at a key moment within *Perelandra*. MacDonald argues in *The Marquis of Lossie* that “as you grow ready for it, somewhere or other you will find what is needful for you in a book” (206). This sentiment can be found in both Lewis’ and MacDonald’s work. Both men use the fantastic to encourage readers to move beyond the boundaries of doubt, creating a space for new or previously rejected concepts to be received. The reader is then provided with what “is needful” for them, as MacDonald and Lewis include Christian themes within their tales, that serve an evangelistic purpose by attempting to create texts which will transform the reader’s faith.

By setting *Phantastes* in Fairy Land, MacDonald provides the reader with a world that is different from their own and yet is familiar. As such the reader is more willing to accept the impossible or improbable within the text, as Fairy Land can work differently from the real world. The rules of faery are known to the reader through engagement with other literature set in these fantastical lands. Anodos is unable to distinguish between the real

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and the imaginary and this is demonstrated during his entry to Fairy Land, when his bedroom furniture comes to life. MacDonald’s world-building becomes a world-unbuilding as Anodos is constantly reminded that he is in Fairy Land by other characters, and the distinction between the real and the fantastic becomes increasingly confused. We as readers, however, are capable of identifying this new world. Through our wider reading we recognize the rules of Fairy Land while Anodos needs to be reminded that Fairy Land is not reality. This use of a secondary world to allow for a greater imaginative willingness on the reader’s behalf, often beyond the scope of the central characters, is also utilized by Lewis, who sets the first two books of his space trilogy, Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra, on different planets.

By engaging with the reader in this way, the uncertainty which surrounds concepts of belief is circumvented and the frontiers of doubt become permeable, or what the critic Darko Suvin refers to as “cognitive estrangement,” Suvin suggest that the new or fantastic aspects of the text (the Novum) are balanced by the real world (the empirical environment) (Nicholls and Clute, “Definitions of SF”). This cognitive estrangement opens a space in which the reader’s imagination can be engaged by placing the Novum alongside the recognizable empirical environment. Lewis touches upon this in his essay “On Science Fiction” where he suggests that

> every good writer knows that the more unusual the scenes and events of his story are, the slighter, the more ordinary, the more typical his persons should be. Hence Gulliver is a commonplace little man and Alice a commonplace little girl. If they had been more remarkable they would have wrecked their books. The Ancient Mariner himself is a very ordinary man. To tell how odd things struck odd people is to have an oddity too much: he who is to see strange sights must not himself be strange. He ought to be as nearly as possible Everyman or Anyman. (60)

Both MacDonald and Lewis provide the reader with an unremarkable hero as a way of anchoring them in the primary reality while they present a secondary, fantasy world. The use of cognitive estrangement by MacDonald and Lewis opens a space where their reader’s imagination can be engaged. Both men subscribed to the Wordsworthian concept that the imagination “shapes and creates . . . governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers” (485-486). However, they extend that concept by suggesting that the imagination is divine; it comes from God, and, therefore, all acts of imagination are to some extent divine.
This awakening of the imagination is not merely tied to the creative process of writing, but is also extended to the readers of MacDonald’s and Lewis’ fiction.

At its centre, *Phantastes* explores the transformative power of reading and imagination. At the heart of Anodos’ journey through Fairy Land is the library of the Fairy Queen. By placing a library at the centre of Fairy Land, MacDonald expresses the significance of books and reading in a unique way. In *The Portent*, MacDonald likens books to a religious experience saying: “The very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (45). Within the realms of Fairy Land in *Phantastes*, MacDonald takes this further as the books’ outward appearance are described with some difficulty: “The walls were lined with books: most of them in ancient bindings, but some in strange new fashions which I had never seen, and which, were I to make the attempt I could ill describe” (138-9). The inclusion of books whose outward appearance is essentially indescribable leads to books which are also inwardly difficult to explain—although Anodos does attempt to do so at length before proving two renditions of tales he has read. Works of fiction become immersive experiences:

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 at the end of the volume I would awake with a sudden bewilderment, to the consciousness of my present life. (140-141)

This complete envelopment of the reader by the text is further underlined by the next chapter, where Anodos loses his own identity while describing the contents of a tale: “But see the power of this book, that . . . I write as if myself had visited the far-off planet, learned its ways and appearances, and conversed with its men and women. And so, while writing, it seemed to me that I had” (150). The power of the text did not end when Anodos finished reading it, but still holds this immersive power over him when back in the real world.

In contrast to this, Anodos manages to keep the first person “I” out of the second tale (the tale of Cosmo). At first this would appear to indicate that the tale has had less influence upon him. The influence of the Cosmo tale can, however, be found throughout *Phantastes*. The tale revolves around a magic mirror owned by the hero, Cosmo. There is a use of mirrors and reflection throughout the text that is most explicit in Anodos’ statement
that: “All mirrors are magic mirrors. The commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass” (123). Mirrors are like fairy books, showing a desirable world into which the viewer longs to go. But, unlike the magic books, they also provide a barrier, creating a duality between the real and the fantastic. While trying to describe Fairy Land, Anodos falls back upon Cosmo’s tale which he has internalised and connects with his attempts to describe Fairy Land in visual terms, often describing the world in terms of light and reflection. Anodos even refers to the magical qualities of mirrors before we are told the Cosmo tale (123). The imagery of the Cosmo tale is used to express Fairy Land to those who are grounded in the real, primary world. The barrier, presented by the mirror, becomes an acknowledgment of Anodos’ inability to accurately relate the tales to us; we are left on this side of the looking glass. The contents of the fairy library open Anodos’ imagination, allowing him to see the fairy inhabitants who have been hidden since he gained his shadow. The awakened imagination also provides Anodos with the imaginative range to attempt to describe his journey in Fairy Land, albeit through a glass darkly.

The imaginative awakening and immersion of Anodos through reading is a textual embodiment of MacDonald’s evangelization through his writing. A project has two aspects: first, a directly religious and theological agenda which is most directly expressed to his readership through non-fiction, but which is also a key element of the majority (if not all) of his fictional works. Second, just as the concept of the mirror is internalised into Anodos’ thinking, MacDonald hopes that the reader, having read Cosmo’s tale, will internalise the religious concepts he presents within his fantasy writing. Following the loss of his congregation at Arundel, MacDonald’s writing became a secondary form of pulpit through which he preaches to his readers (Reis 24).

MacDonald did not purely wish to preach to his readers; instead, he wanted to challenge the boundaries between the reader and the text. This blurring of boundaries is expressed in MacDonald’s essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” where he encourages all readers to engage imaginatively with, and read their own meanings into, his works. There is a deliberate attempt on MacDonald’s part to excite the imagination and to provide tales which hold multiple meanings:

The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended. I will go farther. The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is not to give him things to think about, but to
wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself. (134)

By awakening the imagination and getting readers to think for themselves, MacDonald hopes to do the most good for his readership. MacDonald’s idea of good is to bring the reader closer to God and this is done by awaking the imagination which comes from a divine source. The reference to the power of the uncomprehended within artistic forms is intriguing as it allows a space to develop which only the individual’s imagination can fill. Although MacDonald appears to give up his editorial control over the text by giving imaginative control to the reader, he guides the reader’s imagination in an attempt to do them good as his tale influences the newly awakened imagination so that the reader may “think for himself.” The awakened or awakening of the imagination becomes a defining feature of MacDonald’s engagement with his readership. It is clear that in Phantastes MacDonald engages the reader’s imagination in an attempt to ensure that their reading can be internalised and influence them beyond the act of reading, as is demonstrated by Anodos’ experiences in the Fairy Queen’s library.

The example of transformative reading that Phantastes provides is echoed in C. S. Lewis’ response to the text in Surprised by Joy, in which he states that upon reading Phantastes: “That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised” (180). This new birth of Lewis’ imagination brought him closer to God and, according to Lewis’ account in Surprised by Joy, began his conversion to Christianity (180). By associating his conversion so strongly with MacDonald’s Phantastes, Lewis is endorsing the efficacy of MacDonald’s writing as a means of awakening the imagination as a way of becoming closer to God. Stephen Prickett suggests that within his conversion account Lewis’ assumes the role of Anodos in a similar way to Anodos’ immersion within the tales of the fairy court (176).

In addition to the direct personal effect of Phantastes upon Lewis, there is also an intriguing textual parallel between Anodos’ time in the Fairy Queen’s library and the Un-Man’s telling of stories to The Lady in Perelandra. The conversation is similarly placed in the center of the text and, as with Phantastes, begins with a collection of tales which are intended to immerse (in this instance) the listener. The imaginative engagement of The Lady as the hero of these tales is built upon by the Un-Man: “From the moment when the Un-Man began its tragic stories, there was the faintest touch of theatricality, the first hint of a self-admiring inclination to seize a grand role in the drama of her world” (151). While in MacDonald’s work
the alien tales of Fairy Land delight and positively develop Anodos, here we see the tales of earth provide a means of negative moral development through awakening the imagination. The innocent Romantic conception of the imagination is alluded to by Lewis: “Perhaps she was doing no more—he had good hope that she was doing no more—than responding in a purely imaginative fashion to this new art of Story or Poetry” (144-145). But this Wordsworthian ideal of imaginative response is corrupted through the manipulation of the Un-Man. Thus, Lewis, while seeing imaginative engagement as an innocent thing also allows for the corruption of the imaginatively engaged Lady when she is enveloped by tales that come from a world in a more fallen state than Perelandra.

The ultimate corruption of The Lady within this episode is symbolised by a mirror which allows her to see: “the whole of the alongside woman—the other who is yourself” (118). Thus The Lady is divided through her experience of these tales and the awakening of her imagination. As is later observed: “The image of her beautiful body had been offered to her only as a means to awake the far more perilous part of her great soul” (158). There is at first glance a stark contrast between Perelandra’s mirror and that of Phantastes. For Lewis, the mirror is a stark symbol of division and the envelopment of The Lady within the tales she has been told: her desire to narrativise her life allows her to step through MacDonald’s looking glass into the world of fantasy beyond. Lewis states that the Un-Man is “making her mind a theatre in which that phantom self should hold stage. He had already written the play” (158). This is not a positive step into a fantasy world, but a way in which the author of the work controls those who are enveloped within the tale. While using the same concepts as MacDonald, Lewis provides a sinister and dark side to these tales which affect or transform us, although he also leaves much of his fantasy work open to the same critique enacted by the Un-Man.

To understand why Lewis’ literary representation of transformative reading is so negative, we need only look at the accounts of personal transformative reading Lewis provides in Surprised by Joy. While reading the Twilight of the Gods as a child, Lewis describes becoming totally engulfed in the tale and feeling dissatisfied with reality once the tale had been finished (72-73). Lewis’ reaction to Phantastes, however, is not so internalised but is rather about the ability of the tale’s magic to move into the real world: “I found the light shining on those woods and cottages, and then on my own past life and on the quiet room where I sat and on my old teacher . . . up until
now each visitation of Joy had left the common world momentarily a desert” (180). This, then, is the difference between Lewis’ experience and that of The Lady; while both are altered by their tales, Lewis brings that change back to the real world while The Lady steps into the mirror world offered by those tales.

Anodos, too, manages to step back into the real world, although as is shown through his first attempt to describe one of the fairy tales, his transformation by the texts may not be all it seems. What Lewis demonstrates is the difficult nature of transformative reading, as Donald T. Williams succinctly summarises in *Mere Humanity*:

> Literature can expand the horizons of and deepen our capacity for experience, it can open our eyes to Christian truths which might otherwise have escaped us . . . [I]f we read as aesthetes rather than humble receivers of the author’s intent, or as self-conscious pursuers of culture rather than seekers of truth, it can have the very opposite effect and be a horribly corrupting influence. (150-151)

Lewis’ *Perelandra* provides readers not only with an example of transformative literature, but also a warning of how those transformations can be manipulated by authors and story tellers. As MacDonald’s essay on the fantastic imagination and Lewis’ conversion show, the transformative aspect of literature can become part of a real reader’s experience. Lewis, while being aware of the ability to corrupt a reader through transformation, still attempts to create a transformative literary vehicle in his Space Trilogy.

For Lewis there is a careful balance to be found as a writer because he could easily become the Un-Man, telling stories which only reflect oneself as the hero. Lewis expresses this anxiety to a fictionalised George MacDonald in *The Great Divorce*, where he tells us that “every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from the love of the thing he tells to the love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him” (85). The temptation to write tales without an evangelistic purpose is, for Lewis, tantamount to falling into the other side of the literary mirror. All of Lewis’ work contains Christian themes, even when his work is set on alien worlds. Lewis uses this other world to open the reader’s imagination further and then as the author to guide that open mind towards God. There is therefore an uncomfortable note when we are told that the Un-Man has already written the play for The Lady to act out.

To counter this, Lewis’ plotlines within the Space Trilogy closely
follow Christian mythology, with *Out of the Silent Planet* considering a world in which the fall of man did not happen. *Perelandra* can be seen as a Garden of Eden in which Ransom battles against the Un-Man to avert a fall within that world. *That Hideous Strength*, set on our own world, centres upon the conversion of the heroes, Mark and Jane, to Christianity. Thus Lewis provides all of these works with a clear religious message for his readers; by reading the entire trilogy the reader is moved through various imaginative states. By setting the first two books on Mars and Venus, Lewis presents concepts which would be rejected if they were presented within a more normal environment; these worlds are recognisable only through the eyes of Ransom, an unremarkable hero. It is only through that opening of the imagination in the earlier books that the setting of the *That Hideous Strength* can be plausibly set on Earth; the figure of Ransom becomes a representative of the fantastic and holds a divine status in this final book as the reader’s acceptance of the fantastic is tested by placing an ordinary man, who has undergone and accepted extraordinary things, back into the primary world.

The awakened imagination plays a significant role in both *Phantastes* and *Perelandra*. Through an examination of the implications and responsibilities which C.S. Lewis found within the concept of an awakened imagination, this paper reveals that Lewis was aware of the paradoxical status which he held, opening and influencing the imagination through his writing. Lewis develops the idea more fully in *Perelandra* than MacDonald does in *Phantastes*, allowing us to see and exist on both sides of the mirror, both having our imaginations awakened while reading of the negative consequences of a malicious awakener, in *Perelandra*.

Endnotes
1. Whether this experience was a literal conversion to Christianity or a metaphorical moment from which Lewis’ thoughts regarding religion begins to chance is debated. Given that at the period when Lewis first encountered *Phantastes* he was an atheist and continued as such for a period of years following this moment, I am inclined towards the former understanding of this baptism of the imagination.

Works Cited


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