The Encounter with Fantasy

If there is one thing the still-narrow body of literary scholarship devoted to fantasy has made clear, it is that whatever we are to call “fantasy” must first and foremost deal with the impossible. In a 1978 survey of several scholarly works on the subject, S. C. Fredericks noted that “there is general agreement among the critics that Fantasy constitutes what Irwin calls ‘the literature of the impossible’...” and that fantasy writers “take as their point of departure the deliberate violation of norms and facts we regard as essential to our conventional conception of ‘reality’; in order to create an imaginary counter-structure or counter-norm.”1 W. R. Irwin, to whom Fredericks refers, goes so far as to characterize fantasy as “antireal” and defines it as “a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself.”2 Eric S. Rabkin, in _The Fantastic in Literature_, makes “a direct reversal of ground rules” a condition of the fantastic and says of fantasy that “its polar opposite is Reality.”3 C. N. Manlove agrees that “a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings, or objects” is needed for fantasy, explaining that supernatural or impossible means “of another order of reality from that in which we exist and form our notions of possibility.”4 And in explaining his principle of inclusion for his bibliography _The Literature of Fantasy_, Roger C. Schlobin identifies the literature of fantasy as “that corpus in which the impossible is primary in its quantity or centrality.”5

The criterion of the impossible, then, seems firmly in place in the academic study of fantasy literature; indeed, it may be the first principle generally agreed upon for the study of fantasy. The fantasy authors themselves seem to agree. Ray Bradbury, whose reputation as a science fiction writer often seems to overshadow his own avowed first love for fantasy, wrote that “each fantasy assaults and breaks a particular law” and “attempts to disrupt the physical
world in order to bring change to the heart and mind.” C. S. Lewis, a literary scholar as well as a fantasist, defined literary fantasy (as opposed to psychological fantasy) as “any narrative that deals with impossibles and preternaturals.” And as long ago as 1890, two of the great Victorian masters of the fantastic tale, H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang, prefaced their ambitious fantasy sequel to the *Odyssey*, *The World’s Desire*, with a poem that included the following lines:

Come with us, ye whose hearts are set
On this, the Present to forget;
Come read the things whereof ye know
They were not, and could not be so.

Almost word for word, the modern author Samuel R. Delany echoes Haggard and Lang when he defines the “level of subjunctivity” of fantasy as “could not have happened.”

The notion of the impossible itself raises a number of intriguing questions, not all of which can be addressed adequately by the resources of literary scholarship. What, for example, are the psychological and cultural limits of what we regard as possible? How do we recognize the impossible when we encounter it in a work of art, and how do we decide that a particular impossible event or being signals an individual aesthetic structure rather than a private psychosis or a culturally accepted myth? What of a passage such as the following?

The Kingdom of Yr had a kind of neutral place which was called the Fourth Level. It was achieved only by accident and could not be reached by formula or an act of will. At the Fourth Level there was no emotion to endure, no past or future to grind against. There was no memory or possession of any self, nothing except dead facts which came unbidden when she needed them and which had no feeling attached to them.

The passage is from Joanne Greenberg’s fictionalized account of her own schizophrenia, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, and while the passage clearly describes an “impossible” place and an at least unlikely state of being, the context in which it appears in the novel makes it clear that the novel itself is not a work of fantasy. Had Greenberg presented such schizophrenic fantasies unadorned by the essentially realistic account of hospitalization and psychotherapy that surrounds them, would she have written a fantasy? The obvious answer would seem to be no. Impossibility alone is not enough. As Fredericks observes, literary fantasy must serve a “reality-oriented function” and be deliberate and purposeful in the ways in which it diverges from cognitive reality.
But the idea of a social or rhetorical motive for fantastic events also proves to be inadequate; otherwise, we would have to admit all sorts of myth systems and metaphorical conceits into the realm of fantasy. We cannot comfortably dismiss a Blackfoot creation myth as fantasy simply because its events and beings are “impossible” according to Western cosmology, nor can we protest the “impossibilities” of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Such works are certainly “reality-oriented,” intended at some level to describe and explain the workings of the world. These are the great public fantasies of other times and cultures, and what is “impossible” in them now was once accepted as possible, although they stand at the opposite end of the scale from the visions of an isolated psychotic. The notion of impossibility in fantasy, then, must lie somewhere toward the middle of this scale; it must be more public than the schizophrenic’s hallucination, yet less universal than myth and religion. In fact, contemporary fantasy must engage in an implied compact between author and reader—an agreement that whatever impossibilities we encounter will be made significant to us, but will retain enough of their idiosyncratic nature that we still recognize them to be impossible.

Even as we delimit the nature of the impossible in fantasy, however, new complications arise. We might dismiss dream literature and surrealism—works such as Robert Coates’ *The Eater of Darkness* (1926) or Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions d’Afrique* (1910)—as being too void of meaningful referents, too much like the heavily unconscious fantasies of the schizophrenic for the middle ground we seek. But what are we to do with works such as Mervyn Peake’s *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946–1959) or Peter Dickinson’s *The Blue Hawk* (1976)—works that, except for their bizarre and unfamiliar settings and unusual characters, contain little or nothing that contravenes what we know to be possible? In the *Gormenghast* trilogy, notes Manlove, “Nothing ‘supernatural’ or magical by our standards is in fact present.” Manlove argues that the quality of “otherness” in such a work, the construction of its narrative without any direct referent to the known world, is sufficient that we may call it impossible; and the argument is persuasive, since these works certainly *feel* like fantasies and one comes away from them with the strong impression that one has been traveling in some impossible realm. But already one important factor in our criterion of impossibility shows signs of weakness, and that factor is what we might term the purely cognitive element. Cognition, at least as Darko Suvin uses the term in his characterization of science fiction, may be sufficient to enable us to
recognize the limits of what is possible in a work of science fiction or historical fiction, but it often fails in aiding us to recognize the impossible that is fantasy. If the delineation of the cognitive element in science fiction has been one of the strengths of criticism in that field, it is a fallacy to assume that fantasy employs the same cognitive principle in reverse—that is, if science fiction deals with what we recognize as empirically possible, then fantasy must be what we recognize as empirically impossible. Such an approach ignores the strong affective element that accompanies and sometimes overpowers the cognitive in fantasy, and it fails to account for the ways in which fantasy narratives are carried forward. Cognitive recognition of specific impossibilities may serve to signal us that a given work is a fantasy, but it will not sustain us through multiple volumes of narrative—and in some cases, as with the Gormenghast trilogy, it is difficult to pinpoint any such cognitive impossibility at all.

When do we decide that we are reading something impossible? There are no ghosts, dragons, hobbits, or magical transitions between worlds in the Gormenghast trilogy, only an overriding sense of the grotesque and bizarre. Even when magical events and beings do show up in a fantasy, we expect that the author will keep them under control. A work that piles new impossibility upon new impossibility would be extremely taxing on the reader and in the end likely lead toward incoherence. Similarly, a work that is remarkably rich in invention and in which the terms of impossibility in the fantastic world are not made clear until late in the narrative—a work as David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920)—is apt to be exhausting for most readers. On the other hand, a clear explication of the limits of the impossible can provide a convenient framework for a very accessible adventure story. Phyllis Eisenstein’s *Born to Exile* (1978) maintains a tightly controlled level of cognitive impossibility; its hero can, in science-fictional terms, teleport, though she chooses to place him in a faux-medieval setting in which his talent functions essentially as magic. With no more in the way of cognitive impossibility than this, Eisenstein constructs a highly satisfying series of fantasy narratives. Our sense of being in a fantastic realm arises, it would seem, from some affective apprehension of the impossible rather than from this simple cognitive device—which by itself might even allow us to categorize the work as science fiction.

An interesting principle begins to emerge: We cannot, it is apparent, simply use our recognition of cognitive impossibility to “test” for fantasy, at least not in the same way that we can use our recognition of what is possible to test our
acceptance of a work of science fiction. Another way of stating the difference between science fiction and fantasy is that science fiction has a relationship with the world of today; whether works are set in the past or the future, the reader has an implicit or explicit awareness of a relationship with the contemporary world. Fantasy offers a clean break with reality; settings and characters may be analogous with the “real” world, particularly in historical fantasy, but the rules that govern fantasy worlds are not necessarily consistent with our notion of reality. Recognition of the possible can and often does sustain a reader throughout a work of science fiction, and part of the thrill of reading what is often referred to as “hard” science fiction arises from discovering just how far our concepts of the possible can be stretched. In many works of science fiction, a single glaring impossibility may burst the balloon of the narrative, but a glaring “possibility” in fantasy disturbs us not at all. In fact, the further we progress in a fantasy narrative, the less we expect in the way of new impossible marvels; once the ground rules have been laid, a *deus ex machina* in fantasy is as intrusive as in any other kind of fiction. Nor can a standard adventure novel be made into a true fantasy by informing us at the outset that we are in a mythic world or time, no more than a fantasy can be transformed into realistic fiction by tacking on to the ending a tired phrase like “And then I awoke in my room.”

Does this mean that the criterion of impossibility isn’t a useful way of identifying works of fantasy? After all, by the time we begin the second volume of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or the third or fourth volume of Roger Zelazny’s “Amber” series, we are entrenched in the author’s symbolic universe and do not expect many new “impossibilities” to occur, although we might well expect new inventions consistent with the impossibilities that we have already accepted. Yet it would be absurd to suggest that only the first volume of these or other fantasy series qualify as true fantasies simply because it is in those inaugural volumes that our primary dislocation of what we take to be possible occurs. Once a dragon takes flight in a work of fantasy, or a unicorn talks, or a wardrobe becomes a forest, we are not apt to be much impressed to witness the same thing for a second or third time. But in an effective fantasy work, we do not lose our sense of the wondrous or impossible even long after all the marvels have been introduced and the magic has become commonplace. To account for such works, we must move beyond the simple criterion of cognitive impossibility and examine such elements as tone and setting—elements that help to construct what we might call the affective sense of the impossible.

To use a term that has been explored by both Freud and Gaston Bachelard,
fantasy is in many ways closer to daydreaming or reverie than to cognitive thought, and as Bachelard observes, “Dreaming reveries and thinking thoughts are certainly two disciplines which are hard to reconcile.” The reason Bachelard gives for this is that cognitive thought is based in what he calls our “reality function”:

The demands of our reality function require that we adapt to reality, that we constitute ourselves as a reality and that we manufacture works which are realities. But doesn’t reverie, by its very essence, liberate us from the reality function? From the moment it is considered in all its simplicity, it is perfectly evident that reverie bears witness to a normal, useful irreality function which keeps the human psyche on the fringe of all the brutality of a hostile and foreign non-self.

Bachelard’s “irreality function,” which he explores in greater depth using the resources of phenomenology and Jungian theory, approaches closely what I have called the affective sense of the impossible. And since reality, in the words of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, is socially constructed, it follows that the irreality of fantasy must gain some of its power from socially determined notions of what is possible and impossible. “Finite provinces of meaning” is the term Berger and Luckmann employ to describe the alternate realities of art, religion, and myth; and the term might well be applied in a more limited sense to describe the impossible worlds of artistic fantasy.

Meaning is an essential factor in the irreality function of fantasy; it is what lends the fantasy something resembling Clive Bell’s “significant form” and what sustains our interest in the impossible long after our cognitive apprehension of impossibilities has passed, long after we have resolved the momentary hesitation or irresolution that Todorov calls “the fantastic.” This is hardly a revolutionary thought; any work of art must hold out the promise of some significant meaning and form if we are to retain interest in it, especially in the face of manifest impossibilities. But in fantasy, the sources of meaning, the ideational structures of the narrative, are essential in molding our attitude toward the impossible and in controlling the depth of our response to it. In some kinds of fantasy, the ideational structure is very close to what we might expect from more conventional kinds of fiction. What is commonly (and often surprisingly accurately) called “sword-and-sorcery” fiction—a genre most closely associated with authors such as Fritz Leiber (who is said to have coined the term) and Robert E. Howard—seems to me in many ways closer to historical fiction and science fiction than other kinds of fantasy. Its ideational structure is primarily
technological and political, as the very term “sword-and-sorcery” suggests. A sword, after all, is a tool, and however primitive, it is an implement of technological weaponry. Sorcery is a causal system analogous to science, its rules often so circumscribed that this genre of fiction has managed to give birth to a series of popular games that thoroughly reverse the process of discovery that we ordinarily associate with fantasy: Instead of discovering the rules and limits of the impossible through induction, by following the action of a fantasy narrative, many of these sword-and-sorcery war-gamers prefer to work deductively, learning the rules of the game at the outset and reducing the narrative itself literally to the level of play. It is not surprising that sword-and-sorcery tends on the one hand toward historical fiction (as with Poul Anderson’s *The Last Viking*) and on the other toward science fiction (as with Anne McCaffrey’s *Dragonrider* series). Meaning, whether in Dungeons & Dragons or in sword and sorcery, arises from the same sort of fundamental concerns about how the world works, and what you can then do within it. In conversation, editor David G. Hartwell has referred to such rule-bound fantasy fiction as “sword-and-sorcery procedurals.”

Other kinds of fantasy deal with issues more commonly associated with fairy tales and *Bildungsroman*—issues such as education, personality, morality, duty, family, social relations, and other aspects of human development. Protagonists in these fantasies more often achieve control over self than over environment (although the self may take many forms in a fantastic world), and the ideational structure is psychological. As Bachelard observes of reveries, “They situate us in a world and not in a society.” And the objects, events, and beings that we encounter in this fantastic world—however impossible—must exist in a fullness of affect that enables us to respond to them as though they were real. A contrast with science fiction may be helpful here. In much science fiction, the fantastic environment is subordinated to a rationalized purpose, and the elements of that environment relate to the science fiction reader in much the same way that elements of reality relate to the scientist. They are, to use Ernest Schachtel’s phrase, “objects-of-use”: “The scientist, in these cases, looks at the object with one or more hypotheses and with the purpose of his research in mind and thus ‘uses’ the object to corroborate or disprove a hypothesis, but does not encounter the object as such, in its own fullness.” The perceptual world of science fiction, then, is significant in that its objects are subject to manipulation and control; they are a means to an end. If the furnishings of our room begin to disappear, as they are apt to do in a Philip K. Dick novel, we soon will learn that
it is not really the impossible that is happening but rather some sort of sophisticated yet understandable manipulation of these objects, or our perception of them, for some equally understandable end. In science fiction, objects, landscapes, and even characters are often stripped of all but those qualities that eventually will serve some cognitive purpose; this is why many readers who do not like science fiction sometimes complain of its “flatness,” “coldness,” or “lack of affect” (although such accusations are certainly not always justified).

In fantasy, another kind of “stripping” often takes place, and we may encounter objects reduced not to their usefulness, but rather to their affective significance. It is at first a little disconcerting to read through five volumes of Roger Zelazny’s “Amber” series and learn so little about Amber itself. We are told early in the series that “Amber was the greatest city which had ever existed or ever would exist” and that “every other city, everywhere, every other city that existed was but a reflection of a shadow of some phase of Amber.” But Amber itself often seems to have no population other than its royal family and their hired minions, no streets, no economy, no network of social organization. For Zelazny’s purposes, such aspects of the city are nonessential and may be distracting. Amber exists not like cities in science fiction, which function to show us the problems and promises of technology or population control or some other such issue; rather it exists as an emotional archetype. All we really need know of Amber are its power, its order, and its beauty; what does not tend to reinforce this primary affective response can be dispensed with. Similarly, we do not need to know much about the history, design, or function of the magic wardrobe in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), since it is primarily an emblem of curiosity and mystery, a place to be explored. Nor do we look for an account of the biology of the Nazgul in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (although inevitably fans have tried to do so), since the fearfulness of this creation is quite sufficient to account for its presence in a fantasy.

At this point, we might be tempted to conclude that our original problems concerning the criterion of the impossible in fantasy have been pretty much resolved, and that fantasy manages to sustain our interest in impossible worlds simply by making these worlds emotionally meaningful to us. This is indeed true of some kinds of fantasy, but it does not enable us to distinguish serious fantasy from the purely sensational kinds of narratives that sometimes are allied to it, such as pornography, whimsy, or horror. It may be that a single affective attitude controls a fantastic narrative to the extent that it maintains our interest, but in the most successful serious fantasies, a whole range of emotional experi-
ence is apt to be explored, and we cannot depend on a particular affective construct to sustain our acceptance of the impossible. When a particular affective construct so dominates a work of fantastic literature that we find ourselves waiting for the same emotional sensation to be repeated in different guises, we are no longer in a fully realized fantastic world, but in a world of formula fiction—one that many readers celebrate and sustain through volume after volume of similar adventures. The objects and events in this world are apt to become again “objects-of-use,” repeatedly manipulated by the author in the service of a single dominant emotional tone. Thorne Smith’s delightful *The Night Life of the Gods* (1931) is full of impossible happenings and mythological figures, but all are subordinated to a screwball comic tone that controls the whole work. H. P. Lovecraft’s “shuggoths” and elder gods may be impressive creations in their own right, but once they have served Lovecraft’s primary purpose of giving us a thrill of horror or disgust or awe, they must be hauled offstage or, equally characteristic of Lovecraft, the story must end. Just as Smith’s work can be more aptly labeled comedy than fantasy, so might Lovecraft’s be more aptly labeled horror fiction.

Comedy and horror may of course be elements in any fantasy, but we cannot depend on them as controlling elements. Here another distinction from Manlove may be helpful:

Two broad classes of fantasy may be distinguished: “comic” or “escapist,” and “imaginative” fantasy. The line of division is simple enough: it is between fancy versus imagination, where “fanciful” works are those carrying either no deeper meaning or one lacking in vitality . . . Any number of Waste Lands, broken lances, grails, Eucharistic or baptismal symbols may appear in a story without that story having any potent meaning.21

Manlove may be borrowing the terms “fancy” and “imagination” from one of the authors he discusses in his study, George MacDonald, who drew much the same distinction more than eighty years earlier. Of the creation of fantastic worlds and beings, MacDonald wrote:

When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy. . . .

. . . you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts her [Truth’s] garments to fit her, and Fancy his journeyman that puts the pieces of them together, or perhaps at most embroiders their button-holes.22
Such a distinction between fancy and imagination suggests that in works of true imagination we can expect an ideational structure that goes far deeper than the controlling tone of the work, that is in fact based in what Manlove calls “deeper meaning” and MacDonald “old truths.”

What these deeper meanings and old truths are may vary widely from one author to another, ranging from the Christian Platonism of C. S. Lewis to the blend of Gnosticism and Teutonic philosophy that underlies the work of David Lindsay. What gives credence to such systems in fantasy is the manner in which the fantasist forges a unity between them and the affective structures we have already discussed. This does not mean that fantasy is limited to being didactic or allegorical, but it does imply that at the center of these works of imagination (as opposed to fancy) must be a core of what might best be called belief. Belief in fantasy—what Tolkien calls “Secondary Belief” to distinguish it from the primary belief in experiential reality—arises from the conjunction of psychological affect and ideational structure, and as Tolkien notes, it is quite a different thing from Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Put another way, belief is what enables genuine emotions to be aroused from impossible circumstances, not unlike Marianne Moore’s familiar description of poetry as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” Moore’s observation in her poem “Spenser’s Ireland,” that one is not free until one is “made captive by supreme belief,” is also apt.

Fantasy indeed tries to set us free by making us captive to belief, but since the kind of belief that is peculiar to fantasy arises as much from affect as from cognition, it is not necessary for us to share an author’s philosophies or beliefs for us to accept and “believe in” their embodiment in the narrative. We need not be Christians to be impressed by the strength and kindness of C. S. Lewis’s Aslan; we need not be in agreement with Jesse Weston’s sometimes shaky hypotheses about hero myths to enjoy their embodiment in Roger Zelazny’s Amber series. In Patricia A. McKillip’s The Forgotten Beasts of Eld (1974), we can accept the final transformation of the hideous monster Blammor into the beautiful Liralen bird without necessarily agreeing with the identity of creative and destructive passions that such a metaphor implies. In all of these narratives, affect and tone transform such ideational constructs into events and beings that are fully consistent with the author’s created universe.

Fantasy authors who are most successful at creating this kind of belief attempt neither to allegorize their own systems of belief nor to subordinate those systems to sensation. Instead, they achieve a balanced tension—perhaps more properly a dialectic—between cognition and affect, between moralism
and passion, between the impossible and the inevitable. They do not merely construct metaphors for a preconceived reality, or if they do, the power of the metaphors is apt to transform the nature of those preconceptions into something new. At their most ambitious, these fantasists resemble the painter Peter Copping in David Lindsay's *Devil's Tor*:

Only, what every painter worth his salt is trying to present—probably without knowing it—is neither beauty, nor life, nor truth (charming words, all of them!) . . . but . . . the *whole universe*—at one stroke. By means, necessarily, of action. That is symbolism in a nutshell. Nothing exists apart, but only the universe exists. Whatever individual person or thing I paint must stand, not for itself, but for the entire scheme.24

The notion of symbolism that Lindsay introduces (for the character Copping likely is speaking with Lindsay’s voice here) provides us with the final clue as to how to deal with the impossible in fantasy. Underlying the belief in the fantastic world itself, which, as we have found, arises from the union of idea and affect, is a deeper belief in the fundamental reality that this world expresses. I use the term “expresses” rather than “represents” because many of the finest fantasy writers correctly have rejected the notion that their work is in any sense mere allegory or apologue—“a wall decoration with a label attached,” in the words of Lindsay’s Peter Copping.25 For these writers, the fantasy world does not symbolize the experiential world but rather co-exists with it; each world, in the words of George MacDonald, is “the human being turned inside out,” “a sensuous analysis of humanity.”26 C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love*, calls this attitude “sacramentalism or symbolism” and describes it as “almost the opposite of allegory”: “The allegorist leaves the given—his own passions—to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is a fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory.”27

One might object to the apologetic for idealism that is implied in Lewis’s formulation and thinly disguised in his own fiction, but if the fantasy author successfully integrates idea and affect to achieve a primary level of belief in the work, this deeper level of belief will emerge naturally, without constricting the work or reducing it to overt didacticism. When the primary level of belief falters (as I believe it does from time to time in both Lewis’s *Perelandra* and his *That Hideous Strength*), the deeper belief overpowers it, and we have at best a very entertaining homiletic. But in the best works of fantasy, ranging from the rigorous intellectuality of Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* to the delicate lyricism
of Peter Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, this deeper belief is so much of a piece with
the created world that the question of “meaning” becomes a phenomenological
rather than a literary one.

This discussion has of necessity been rather abstract, and unfortunately has
not permitted room for detailed investigations of particular works. But it does
suggest a kind of structure for the reading of fantasy that enables us to posit an
answer to our original question of how fantasy not only sustains our interest in
the impossible, but finally wins our belief and reveals that the impossible is,
after all, the real. Briefly summarized, this structure is as follows:

1. **cognition of the impossible** in which we realize, usually early on in a fantasy,
   that the accepted ground rules of our reality are in some significant way
   being contravened;

2. **location of the impossible**, or the awareness that this contravention of reality
   lies somewhere between private psychological fantasy and culturally shared
   myth (although in works such as Evangeline Walton’s Mabinogion novels or
   T. H. White’s *Once and Future King* the public myths of earlier cultures may
   be transformed into fantasies for our time);

3. **delimitation of the impossible**, which assures us that the work is under control
   and that some underlying system places constraints on what may happen in
   this fantastic world;

4. **feeling of the impossible**, or the affective sense of “otherness” (as opposed to
   horror’s “outsidedness”) or “irreality” that assures our continued emotional
   investment in this world even after new marvels have ceased to appear;

5. **awareness of affective significance**, which sets the work apart from mere spec-
   ulation or sensationalism by promising that this emotional investment, once
   made, will be rewarded by some underlying affective order;

6. **awareness of cognitive significance**, or “deeper meaning,” which in effect re-
   focuses our cognitive concerns away from the surface impossibilities of the
   narrative and toward an emerging ideational structure;

7. **belief** in the fantastic world, arising from the interaction between affective
   and cognitive significance; and

8. **deeper belief**, which permits certain fantasy works to become analogues of
   inner experience virtually as valid as events of the “real world,” and which
   express the author’s own most fundamental convictions.

Not all fantasies, of course, will carry the reader successfully through all
these stages of experience, and not all will try. At worst, a fantasy will not carry
us much beyond the initial recognition that what we are reading is impossible;
at best, it will lead us to a further recognition that these surface impossibilities constitute a necessary strategy for approaching some profound and intense reality. For such works, “the impossible” may be little more than a surface structure; the works themselves concern things that could not be more real. Fantasies that successfully lead us all the way to this deeper belief are still rare, despite the illustrious history of fantastic literature; perhaps, indeed, taking us that far is the most fantasy can do. If so, that is still a great deal to ask of any literature.

Afterword

Since this essay originally appeared, the body of critical literature on fantasy has blossomed, but the criterion of the impossible remains firmly in place in formal definitions of the genre. In one of the most influential studies of the 1990s, Strategies of Fantasy, Brian Attebery offers the attractive notion that fantasy is best regarded as what logicians call a “fuzzy set,” readily definable at its center but blurring at the edges. Still, he writes, “The essential content is the impossible, or, as I put it in The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature, ‘some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law’ . . . there is general agreement that some such violation is essential to fantasy.”28 Another highly influential work—notable because of the dozens of theoretical and taxonomical propositions scattered among its hundreds of reference entries—is John Clute and John Grant’s The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (1999), which offers the following as a working definition: “A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it . . . when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms.”29

At the same time, an increasing number of authors have developed ingenious strategies for subverting, bending, or confusing our notions of the boundary between the possible and the impossible, from the genetically engineered alien dragons in Anne McCaffrey’s ongoing series of Pern novels to the afterburner-assisted part-mechanical dragons of Michael Swanwick’s The Iron Dragon’s Daughter (1993). Swanwick’s semi-sequel, The Dragons of Babel (2008), combines figures drawn from Sumerian, Scandinavian, African, and Japanese myth and folklore with allusions that seem intended to confound the “impossibility” of the setting. His fantasy Babylon features Frank Lloyd Wright lounges,
saloons with framed pictures of Muhammad Ali, Bowie knives, gas chromatographs, dumpsters, Kawasaki motorcycles and Mercedes and BMW automobiles, Pepsis, McDonalds, Marlboros, Zippo lighters, Hermes bags (for carrying runes), Hard Rock Café t-shirts and Givenchy gowns—allusions that in a science fiction novel would seem to violate a basic writers’ workshop principle sometimes called “Brand Name Fever,” but that here serve to undermine any assumptions we may bring to his created world. Palace courtiers check their Blackberries and PDAs, while animate stone lions discuss Faulkner and Tolstoy and wise old women quote Mary McCarthy. Swanwick is far from the only author testing these boundaries—Ted Chiang, Kelly Link, China Miéville, Jeffrey Ford, and M. Rickert are among others who come to mind—but his work may serve as one of the most dramatic and critically informed examples.

As far as the structure of reading fantasy is concerned—the question of how fantasy texts draw the reader in beyond the introduction of initial marvels—two of the most important recent studies are John Clute’s *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* and Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Clute’s “lexicon” is actually a collection of thirty short essays on various concepts that he associates with horror fiction, and in part builds upon a proposed four-part “grammar” for fantasy narratives—“wrongness,” “thinning,” “recognition,” and “healing”—which he earlier developed in his entry on fantasy in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*; here he revises “healing” to “return” and offers a parallel structure for horror fiction—“sighting,” “thickening,” “revel,” and “aftermath.” While the details of Clute’s developing system are too complex to summarize here (like Northrop Frye, he also parallels each four-part grammar to corresponding seasons, with fantasy beginning in autumn and horror in spring), his proposals are most illuminating when viewed as a means of structuring the experience of reading a text, though they take a much different approach from that proposed in this essay. Mendlesohn, who rather pointedly avoids the question of defining fantasy as a genre or mode, suggests a typology of fantasy narratives based largely on “the reader’s relationship to the framework.” She classifies fantasies as “portal-quest,” “immersive,” “intrusion,” and “liminal,” with an added fifth chapter on “irregulars,” or texts that subvert, question, or evade the taxonomy that she has proposed. The portal-quest fantasy involves a fantastic world entered through a one-way portal (such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*); immersive fantasy takes place entirely within an imagined world (and thus is allied to science fiction); intrusion involves the fantastic invading our own world (and thus may be allied to
horror); the liminal happens when the level of fantasy may be indeterminate and the reader’s experience may seem at odds with that of the characters (her lead examples are Hope Mirrlees and Mervyn Peake). Both Clute’s and Mendlesohn’s ideas are far more comprehensive than the limited reader-response structure proposed in this essay, which limits itself mostly to the apprehension of the impossible, but both are equally reader-centered.