

Modern Fantasy

Five Studies

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F O R E V E L Y N

Preface

Modern fantasy has a very large readership, and already enjoys considerable academic repute, particularly in America: it is surprising that as yet no serious study of the subject has appeared. While this book was not really written with the object of filling any gap, it may perhaps serve that purpose.

My prime aim is to examine the work of a range of the better and better-known writers of fantasy to discover what of literary or other value they contain: in this way, subject to the limitations of any definition of fantasy, this book is an assessment of the genre. The method has as far as possible not been an *a priori* one: in judging value I have tried to use the yardstick of how far a work keeps to its own terms, rather than apply any external standards of what literature should be. And while I have outlined each author's personal and literary standpoint as a whole, this has been to provide a context for deductions drawn from the main work, rather than to fix the lines of analysis: only in the case of *The Water-Babies*, where it is possible to take two views of a given literary fact, have I used other material to be decisive. As this book developed, I began to see how in every one of the works I was considering there was some form of a division, traceable to the author, by which the book failed to be true to its own laws. In the conclusion I explain these divisions as part of one basic split which must occur in the writing of any serious modern fantasy.

I owe much to the English Department at Edinburgh, which has for several years sponsored the teaching of fantasy as an optional constituent of the honours course; to my students, for many stimulating intellectual battles and insights; and to Alastair Fowler and Ian Campbell for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions. A more general debt of gratitude I should like to pay to my long-ago teachers Derek Burrell and Tom Coulson, neither of whom would probably admit much association with this particular book. To my wife, who typed three chaotic

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drafts of manuscript and offered endless advice on a subject for which she had no especial relish, the book is dedicated.

C.N.M.

February 1975

Preface to the paperback edition

I am glad to note that this is no longer the only critical book on modern fantasy, and that two studies, by E. S. Rabkin and W. R. Irwin, appeared in America during 1976.

A few minor corrections have been made; for some of them I am grateful to observant reviewers, and, for certain biographical facts concerning Tolkien, to Humphrey Carpenter's *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (George Allen and Unwin, 1977).

C.N.M.

Abbreviations

The main texts dealt with are referred to by short forms given at the foot of the first page of each chapter, or simply by page numbers. Abbreviations used in the notes are listed at the beginning of each chapter's notes section at the back of the book.

1 Introduction

In the introduction to his *A Checklist of Modern Fantastic Literature* E. F. Bleiler writes,

If anyone were to ask me what is meant by the term 'fantasy', I fear that I would have to admit my ignorance. A year or so ago I would have had no difficulty answering, but the compiling and reading involved in the preparation of the *Checklist* has forced me to realise that fantasy may be almost all things to all men. I have often wished that the subject of this book were something with an objective reality, such as minerals or plants.¹

This *caveat* has force, and the definition of 'fantasy' which will be outlined here makes no claim to satisfy everyone; all that matters ultimately is the isolation of a particular kind of literature. However, though the name is relatively unimportant, that of 'fantasy' is kept here because most people, Bleiler included, apply it to the books we shall be considering.

This understood, a fantasy is: *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.*

A fiction. A work such as Bovet's *Pandaemonium, or The Devil's Cloyster. Being a further Blow to Modern Sadduceism, Proving the Existence of Witches and Spirits* (1684) is not a fantasy, because the book sets out to make us believe that such 'authenticated' incidents as 'A Remarkable passage of one named the Fairy-Boy of Leith in Scotland, given me by my worthy friend Captain George Burton, and attested under his own hand', or 'A Relation of the Apparition of Fairies, their seeming to keep a Fair, and what happened to a certain man that endeavoured to put himself in amongst them',² really occurred. Of the same order is the account in Bishop Leadbeater's *The Hidden Side of Things* of the hierarchies and colours of the fairies he studied with his 'inner eye' on the hill-side of Slieve-na-mon in Ireland;³ or the photographs in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Coming of the Fairies*⁴ of the little people (some in contemporary dress; e.g. p. 71) found by children in the glen near the village of Cottingley, Yorkshire. The aim in these works

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is to produce absolute credence in the reader. Some Christian fantasies try to prove or make us come to believe in the existence of God and heaven generally (thus going as far as the aim announced in Bovet's title), but none ask us to take the particular stories or characters they present simply at face-value. C. S. Lewis remarked of Conan Doyle's book:

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle claimed to have photographed a fairy, I did not, in fact, believe it: but the mere making of the claim – the approach of the fairy to within even that hailing distance of actuality – revealed to me at once that if the claim had succeeded it would have chilled rather than satisfied the desire which fairy literature had hitherto aroused.⁵

Thus when J. R. R. Tolkien states that *The Lord of the Rings* is an expansion of the historical record in an extant Middle-earth chronicle, the Red Book of Westmarch, his object is to increase the verisimilitude, not the verity of his work – unless we are simple-minded, or Tolkien himself turns out to be an elf.⁶ On the other hand, if a fantasy is powerfully presented or realized it can produce an imprint on our imaginations deep enough to give it a measure of truth or reality, however much that truth is unverifiable. Something which we *know* at the outset to be impossible – a world like Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast, a system of angelic planetary intelligences like Lewis' Oyéresu or a stone which is a gateway to mystic union as in Charles Williams' *Many Dimensions* – may by virtue of the strength and skill with which it is created make us feel simultaneously that it does and does not have reality.

Christian, or implicitly Christian, fantasy may also see another kind of balance of belief: here the 'real' world is often not our universe, which to the writers is no less fantastic than those they have created, but is equated with the final Reality from which all worlds stem. For Tolkien, the fantasist 'may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be as like and unlike the fallen that we know' (*Tree and Leaf* (1964), p. 63). Or as the formula used by Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis after him has it, 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou.'⁷ Here of course the distance between the fantastic world and truth is a measure of its limitation. For the Christian, only one fantasy has come true in our world without ceasing to be a fantasy – the story recounted in the Gospels.

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Supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects (we shall come back to earlier parts of the definition). This phrase is meant to cover whatever is treated as being beyond any remotely conceivable extension of our plane of reality or thought. Peake's Gormenghast, for instance, has no connection with our sphere of possibility: the author suggests no way in which it might be reached from our world, nor does he give it any location in time or space. Nothing 'supernatural' or magical by our standards is in fact present: the inhabitants of the castle are bizarre, and the ancient Ritual by which they govern their lives makes them still more odd, but they are none of them gods, angels or fairies, and there are no miracles. Only the existence of the realm itself is impossible or wholly 'other' in relation to ours, just as ours would be to it: the situation is one of two separate natures. In science fiction we find that such otherness is never present, however remote the location: for example, the planets described in Frank Herbert's *Dune* or the far galaxy in Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy are possible worlds in that they are set in our universe and describe the sorts of events and civilizations that conceivably could exist, whether now or in the future.

There are fantasies which are set in the empirically known world, but the world is either juxtaposed with or transfigured by the presence of the supernatural. Some of E. Nesbit's fairy-tales for children describe the appearance of strange and amusing beasts with magic powers, like the Phoenix or the Psammead, who turn up in contemporary England; and the fantasies of Charles Williams portray what happens when such objects or forces as the Holy Grail, the original Tarot Pack, a stone made of the First Matter of Creation or the archetypes of the forces sustaining life appear in our society.

Supernatural or impossible means therefore, 'of another order of reality from that in which we exist and form our notions of possibility'. Kingsley set out in *The Water-Babies* to show 'that there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature',⁸ but he knew well enough that whatever apologetics may do they still rightly leave the need for the final leap of faith – the leap from nature to supernature.⁹ As soon as the 'supernatural' has become possible we are no longer dealing with fantasy but with science fiction. Consider, for example, Theodore Cogswell's short story, 'The Wall around the World'. This describes a pastoral society of people who use flying broomsticks as their mode of transport.

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They cannot however fly high enough to get over a thousand-foot wall that surrounds their country, until one Porgie builds the first broomstick-assisted glider. On the other side of the wall he finds a machine-based society, one member of which explains to him how, years previously, when men saw how increasing technology led to neglect of the development of spiritual power, they resolved to train a number of people in habits of superstition and then set them in a world which would foster these, and through them the growth of the mind's power over matter. Porgie is told that when such power eventually becomes

'simply a matter of training and method, then the ritual, the mumbo-jumbo, the deeply ingrained belief in the existence of supernatural forces will be no longer necessary.

'These phenomena will be only tools that anybody can be trained to use, and the crutches can be thrown away. Then the Wall will come tumbling down.'

And a little later ' "Mind and Nature . . . magic and science . . . they'll get together eventually." '10 In this story broomsticks and levitation have become another tool of technological advance.

Even stories which explore possibility in the form of 'might-have-been' worlds remain on our terms science fiction. The notion that the form of our world and universe is, in every instant, one among an infinity of possibles is behind H. Beam Piper's 'He Walked Around the Horses', the story of an English envoy, en route in 1809 'to the court of what Napoleon had left of the Austrian Empire', who suddenly disappears, while examining a change of horses in a Prussian inn-yard, never to be seen again - 'At least, not in this continuum. . .':11 he proceeds, minus his horses and servants, in what otherwise appears to be the same inn-yard, and only gradually finds that he is now living in a world where neither the American nor the French revolution has succeeded and Napoleon is a little-known royalist colonel in the French army. Similar to this story is Robert Sheckley's 'The Store of the Worlds'; and a variation of it, found in Pohl's 'Let the Ants Try' or 'Target One', Arthur Porges' 'The Rescuer' or Ray Bradbury's 'A Sound of Thunder', is what might happen to the present if time travel enabled us to tamper with the past.¹² On a formal level at least, none of these stories is any less probable, as speculation about what the past or the present might have become, than predictions concerning the future like *Brave New World* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And all of them are based on the idea of an infinity of possible worlds,

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but their possibility has reference only to our actualized world. A common medium of possibility for our world and those of fantasy however would only be found by referring back to an original Creator in whom all worlds would share their reality – and comparative unreality.

A substantial or irreducible element. Take *substantial* first. In part this refers quite simply to the sheer amount of the impact of the supernatural on the story. E. H. Visiak's *Medusa*, where the awful fascination of the monster of the abyss is reached only at the end of a book primarily engaged in description of an eighteenth-century voyage to Pernambuc, is arguably no fantasy. But the use of the term *substantial* here also relates to what is the true subject of a book. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, for instance, because it simply uses Orlando's reincarnations as a machine or device by which he may enact the cultural history which is the book's real concern, does not come under our heading either. The same, broadly, is true of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*: Arthur, Merlin and Gramarye are all versions of Britain idealized; or of T. F. Powys' books, which are emphatically about life and death in this world, and not the existence of or in any other. The *Iliad*, the Ithacan section of the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*: despite the impact of the gods on the affairs of men, these epics are all primarily concerned with the working out of human destiny: unlike *Paradise Lost* they are not *about* the gods as well. Chaucer's Knight's and Franklin's tales, Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, *Hamlet* – the supernatural here is never more than a postulate, a backcloth to the portrayal of this mortal estate.

Irreducible. It must not be possible wholly to explain the supernatural or impossible away, by seeing it simply as a disguised projection of something within our 'nature'. Beast and moral fables are not really fantasies. Of the latter Britain boasts many examples in the form of the century and more of child-improving fairy-tales written from about 1750 onwards, among the first of which are the stories in Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or the Little Female Academy* (1749): one describes the escape of its hero from the clutches of a giant by means of a magic fillet he discovers on a statue, and is followed by this exhortation from Mrs Teachum simply to translate supernatural beings and events into moral data as one reads:

'Giants, Magic, Fairies, and all sorts of supernatural Assistances in a story, are

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introduced only to amuse and divert: For a Giant is called so only to express a Man of great Power; and the magic Fillet round the Statue was intended only to show you, that by Patience you will overcome all Difficulties. Therefore by no means let the notion of Giants or Magic dwell upon your minds.' (2nd ed. (1749), p. 41.)

Nor, again, where the supernatural is seen as a symbolic extension of the purely human mind is the work in which it appears a fantasy. This is the case in the *Alice* books, where the happenings are presented as Alice's dreams: as Tolkien says, 'since the fairy-story deals with "marvels", it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion', and, 'The very root (not only the use) of their [the *Alice* books]' "marvels" is satiric, a mockery of unreason; and the "dream" element is not a mere machinery of introduction and ending, but inherent in the action and transitions' (*Tree and Leaf*, pp. 19, 64). In 'Gothic' novels – Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, for instance – the presence of the supernatural is of a piece with dislocated plots, frenzied passions, the use of chiaroscuro and underground passages and vaults containing guilty secrets and unbridled lusts: it expresses the revolt of a purely human subconscious against reason, figured in organized religion and social civility. Those Gothic novels in which the supernatural is revealed to be some merely natural phenomenon or a trick of the light – as in the works of Mrs Radcliffe – are really no different in kind from those which offer no such explanation, for in both the purpose is simply to stimulate the reader's unconscious terrors. A work such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* would however be impossible to categorize here: are the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel real, or are they figments of the governess' warped imagination?

It is true that in fantasy the supernatural may in part belong to our reality by being a disguised physical, moral or mental phenomenon, but it is never more than partly these things. Kingsley's Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and her actions in *The Water-Babies*, for instance, are an allegory of the law of action and reaction in nature; Tolkien's Middle-earth is in one aspect a projection of our world as it would be if we would only see it aright; George MacDonald's North Wind, Mara, and the grandmother in the 'Curdie' books are mother surrogates or even versions of the Jungian *anima*. At the same time, however, Mrs Bedoneby-

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asyoudid is seen as the sub-vicar of God without whom there would be no laws; Middle-earth is a world created and considered for its own sake; and MacDonald's supernatural agents are portrayed as expressions of God's immediate purpose within creation.

Evoking wonder. By *wonder* is meant anything from crude astonishment at the marvellous, to a sense of 'meaning-in-the-mysterious' or even of the numinous. Wonder is of course generated by fantasy purely from the presence of the supernatural or impossible, and from the element of mystery and lack of explanation that goes with it. The science-fiction writer throws a rope of the conceivable (how remotely so does not matter) from our world to his: the fantasy writer does not – or, where like Kingsley he tries to, it falls short. Thus the unexplained mirror apparatus through which MacDonald's Mr Vane reaches fairyland in *Lilith* excites more wonder than the optical pseudo-science employed by Wells in *The Invisible Man* to account for his hero's powers of self-effacement.

But in fantasy wonder is not only the sort of by-product described above, but a central feature – or as Tolkien puts it 'the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder' (*Tree and Leaf*, p. 19). The worlds of science fiction have as much potential as fantasy for the strangeness which is one precondition of wonder: think of the superbly imagined landscape of Aldiss' *Hothouse*, where a giant banyan tree covers half a static globe beneath a dying sun, and a whole new variety of predatory fauna and flora war with the remnants of mankind for survival; or the drowned or crystal worlds of J. G. Ballard; or the equally surreal landscapes of Ray Bradbury. Yet our contemplation of that strangeness is rarely allowed full scope; the setting is absorbed by an insistent narrative of war, the struggle for survival, or discovery and consequences, the dominant leitmotifs of the genre. The jungle in Aldiss' book, however exotic, is the antagonist of man, and exists only to be circumvented, not looked at; the triffids, krakens, chrysalids, lichens and Midwich cuckoos of Wyndham are little more than initiators of quiet epics of the human will to survive; the Lithians of James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* are purely the data of a developing theological dispute: little is present for its own sake. It would of course be wrong to declare that this situation is true of all science fiction or even exclusively true of any one story – one thinks of Asimov's *Fantastic Voyage* or of some moments in

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the work of Ballard or Bradbury – and equally false to say that everything is otherwise in fantasy. Nevertheless there is a definite tendency for the latter to be more contemplative in aim and character, concerned at least as much with states of being as with processes of becoming. In *Perelandra*, for example, C. S. Lewis is as concerned to portray the planet and the Lady's innocence as the Un-man's temptation of her and its struggle with Ransom. In his 'Titus' trilogy Peake is in fact rather more interested in the character of Gormenghast than in the plots against the castle. Frequently in a fantasy one finds description slowing or halting the narrative: so much is this so with Peake that one could at times say rather that the narrative interrupts the description.

This strong element of contemplation in fantasy can be related to other factors. Fantasy often draws spiritual nourishment from the past (even when set in the present day, as with Lewis' or Williams' fiction), particularly from a medieval and/or Christian world order – for example, the work of MacDonald, Morris, Dunsany, Eddison, Williams, Lewis, Tolkien, Peake – where science fiction is usually concerned with the future and the way we may develop. Again, in fantasy the direction of the narrative is often circular or static, where in science fiction it is generally evolutionary or dynamic. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is subtitled *There and Back Again*, and the same title might apply to *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the quest begins and ends in the Shire, and its object throughout is the preservation of the peoples and the variety of Middle-earth. The dynamic of time and its wearing action is present, but in the form of what is lost of the old rather than what is gained of the new. In some fantasies there is a supernatural irruption followed by a return to normality: a phoenix, a genie or the principles behind creation appear, cause havoc, whether grim or amusing, and finally remove or are removed. This is the basic pattern in the work of, for example, F. Anstey, E. Nesbit and Charles Williams; Whereyouwantogoto (or don't – the title is from one of E. Nesbit's stories) ends as Whereyoustartedfrom. Of fantasy in general the title *The Worm Ouroboros* ('The Endless Worm') by E. R. Eddison is perhaps a fair description, though the nature of the story itself is an extreme version: at the end, when they have killed off all the villains and restored peace and plenty, the heroes grow bored, and with supernatural help have their enemies resuscitated so that they can start all over again.

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With which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms. The supernatural or impossible in fantasy is not simply strange and wonderful, nor is it considered in terms only of distance: the reader becomes partially familiar with or at home in the marvellous worlds presented, and the mortal characters establish relationships with beings or objects from the 'beyond'. In fantasy children meet and talk with a phoenix, or men with angels, or the reader becomes closely acquainted with a world like Gormenghast or Arcturus. Often a relationship or contract between the supernatural and natural orders is central. This is of course *de rigueur* in Christian fantasy, and in those stories where in return for co-operation the supernatural imposes conditions, as in the traditional fairy-tale and those fantasies of which it is a forbear – for instance Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*, Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* or the stories of F. Anstey and E. Nesbit.

It is this, more than anything else, that distinguishes fantasy from the ghost and horror story. In the latter the supernatural is left entirely alien, for the point is the shock, the '*frisson* of the supernatural',¹³ that is experienced both by the characters and the reader. That *frisson* is invariably one of numinous rage. Some of the most effective stories use familiar or domestic situations to make that rage at once more terrifyingly near and more dreadfully 'other'. One thinks of the apt incongruity of the name 'familiar' given to the fiend in the form of a monkey which is revealed to the minister in J. Sheridan le Fanu's 'Green Tea', when his addiction to green tea finally opens his 'inner' and 'spiritual' eye: the furious creature, visible only to him, plagues his every activity until he is tormented into violent suicide. The master of the method is M. R. James: a good example is his 'The Diary of Mr. Poynter'. This describes a bibliophile, one James Denton, who buys four early-eighteenth-century quarto volumes relating to the area in which he has his country house. His aunt, who lives in the same house, finds a beautiful piece of curtain material of strange design pasted in one of the books and arranges for it to be copied to provide curtains, although the man employed for this task feels that the nature of the design is somehow evil. When the job is done and the curtains are up in the bedrooms of the house, we resort to Denton, sitting late one evening in his room, alternately reading and dozing in an armchair until he

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bethought himself that his brown spaniel, which ordinarily slept in his room, had not come upstairs with him. Then he thought he was mistaken: for happening to move his hand which hung down over the arm of the chair within a few inches of the floor, he felt on the back of it just the slightest touch of a surface of hair, and stretching it out in that direction he stroked and patted a rounded something. But the feel of it, and still more the fact that instead of a responsive movement, absolute stillness greeted his touch, made him look over the arm. What he had been touching rose to meet him. It was in the attitude of one that had crept along the floor on its belly, and it was, so far as could be recollected, a human figure. But of the face which was now rising to within a few inches of his own no feature was discernible, only hair. Shapeless as it was, there was about it so horrible an air of menace that as he bounded from his chair and rushed from the room he heard himself moaning with fear: and doubtless he did right to fly.¹⁴

The syntax drifts, like Denton's hand, into contact. The hand hangs within a few inches of the floor, the object rises to within a few inches of his face; the poise of civility and terror is caught neatly in the 'absolute stillness *greeted*' and 'What he had been touching *rose to meet* him'; the final dry comment, as if there were any question in the matter, mocks irrelevant reason, and its cool tone heightens the terror of the scene. Denton's stroking of the thing in mistake for his dog brings the horror so close to domesticity as to drive it to the limit of sheer alien otherness. The whole object is the production in the reader of as powerful a jolt of shock as is possible.

Sometimes terrifying supernatural beings are present in fantasy, but they are generally matched by at least equally potent supernatural powers for good which work on man's side. In MacDonald's *Phantastes* the deceptive Alder Maiden with her back in the form of a coffin and the devouring Ash Tree with the hollow heart are countered by the friendly Beech Tree and the Knight in Rusty Armour; and in W. H. Hodgson's *The Night Land* the surreal horrors from the outer darkness which surround the Last Redoubt of mankind are frequently foiled by a magic light emanating from some power for good. Nearer, though unintentionally so, to the horror story is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* where, as will be seen, the power and dread of Sauron are much more vividly felt than the forces of right.

The character of 'fantasy' now outlined is, to repeat, that of *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with*

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which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms. Some subdivision within this definition must now be made.

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. For example the point of the work of E. Nesbit, F. Anstey, Milne or Thackeray is the reader's pleasure in the invented characters or situations: naturally, any reader is free to speculate on the lines of 'O Felix Culpa! The Sacramental Meaning of Winnie-the-Pooh', by C. J. L. Culpepper, D.Litt., Oxon. – any reader monomaniac enough to ignore F. C. Crews' portrait of him.¹⁵ The same is true of escapist fantasies like those of William Morris, Dunsany, Eddison, James Branch Cabell and the more dubious hosts of Hope Mirrlees, Hannes Bok, Lin Carter *et al.* at present being turned out by Ballantine. Even where there is a possible mythic or philosophic significance to a story, as with the Dry Tree in Morris' *The Well at the World's End*, it is there not so much for its symbolic importance as for the sense of wonder that invests it. Any number of Waste Lands, broken lances, grails, eucharistic or baptismal symbols may appear in a story without that story having any *potent* meaning.¹⁶ More than this, where a story does have significance attached to it – as in the case of those of Cabell – the world is indeed 'attached', for the meaning has been neither felt by the author nor vitally realized in the story; both Cabell and Eddison for example are fond of armchair philosophies and emotions, toying with sorrow and death without ever really coming to grips with them:

'But I cannot put aside the thought that I, who for the while exist in this mortgaged body, cannot ever get out to you. Freydis, there is no way in which two persons may meet in this world of men: we can but exchange, from afar, despairing friendly signals, in the sure knowledge they will be misinterpreted. So do we pass, each coming out of a strange woman's womb, each parodied by the flesh of his parents, each passing futilely, with incommunicative gestures, toward the womb of a strange grave: and in this jostling we find no comradeship.'¹⁷

There is a sense of enclosure: the author is simply indulging in private reverie and mellifluous metaphysics. Or else filigree sentimentality:

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she went up in state, alone save for her train-bearers, between the sea-horses. Lessingham, watching, bethought him that not far otherwise might the foam-born Goddess Herself ascend azured spaces of Her eternal sea, between sunset and the moon's rising. And then he bethought him as if all time's treasure-house should have been distilled, from eternity to eternity, into one frail pearl, and in that superlative should pass, under his eyes, beneath cliffs of night.¹⁸

There is little intelligence or any fibre of reality in this: it dissolves, every particular sliding away into a bath of charged feeling.

Now it is not claimed here that would-be 'imaginative' fantasists always avoid these, and other, 'escapist' failings: only that they set out to do so. Their object is to enlist their experience and invention into giving a total vision of reality transformed: that is, to make their fantastic worlds as real as our own. How far a cross-section of them manage to do this, and why they fall short where they do, it is one of the aims of this book to portray.

The writers we shall be considering are Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and Mervyn Peake. They are among the best known of modern writers of fantasy and the variety of their work provides a fairly comprehensive picture of the kind. Represented here are Christian, semi-Christian and non-Christian fantasies; fantastic worlds set on earth, in the mind, in pseudo-historical relation to our world, on other planets, in heaven or fairyland, or beyond all even fictional connection with our reality; and a range of approaches to the supernatural from the near-scientific to the near-mystical. We shall find also that they show an almost complete scale of imaginative achievement.

The aims of this book are thus primarily to show the diversity of fantasy and the varying successes of a range of its better-known writers in realizing a fully imaginative vision. It is more immediately a survey than a 'one-theme' work: but some generalizations arising from the survey will be made in the conclusion.

2 Charles Kingsley (1819–75) and *The Water-Babies*

Kingsley's life¹ may appear settled and socially secure enough: from July 1842, after his graduation from Cambridge in February with a First in Classics and a Second in Mathematics, and his subsequent ordination, he was first curate and then shortly afterwards rector of the parish of Eversley in Hampshire until his death; he seems also to have enjoyed a happy family life (he married in 1844). In fact, however, he was in many ways a restless man, his views subject to flux, his interests manifold to the point of incoherence, and they and his friendships alike often impulsive and fleeting.

Kingsley chafed at Eversley. He had a native inability to keep still, and felt too far from the centre of things in London; a feeling only fuelled by the seasonal discomforts of the poorly-sited rectory and the local squire's refusal to build another. Thus, while his job as parson remains the background of his life, he is found variously working with F. D. Maurice as a Christian Socialist for the Chartist Movement from 1848 to 1852; as an enthusiastic (and able) amateur scientist from 1852 onwards; as Professor of English Literature at Queen's College, London in 1848, and Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge from 1860 to 1869; as a chaplain to Queen Victoria from 1859, and to the Prince of Wales from 1861; and as a canon of Chester Cathedral from 1870 to 1873, and of Westminster Abbey from 1873. None of the posts and interests was such as to prevent Kingsley from devoting the major part of every year to Eversley, but his taking them made him more able to stay

ABBREVIATIONS

CKL *Charles Kingsley, His Letters and Memories of His Life*, ed. by his wife (Frances E. Kingsley), 2 vols., 1st ed. (Kegan Paul, 1876).

Numbers in parentheses are throughout page references from *The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (Macmillan, 1863).

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contented as rector. At the same time he was constantly involved in friendships, disputes and controversies with prominent Victorian intellectuals. He had a close bond with Maurice, who led him into Christian Socialism and an optimistic, even universalist, theology; was acquainted with Carlyle, to whose work he owed much of his cult of manliness and his later role, unwelcome to him, of 'muscular Christian';² and befriended J. A. Froude in the teeth of Oxford opinion over the publication of his *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849). He corresponded with Darwin, Huxley and Lyell, advancing his own Christianized theory of evolution. His blind patriotism and his dislike of coloured peoples led him into conflict, even with his friends, over such issues as the brutal behaviour of Rajah Brooke in Sarawak, or of Governor Eyre in Jamaica, the Indian Mutiny and the American Civil War; and a lifelong and fanatical hatred of Roman Catholicism brought about the celebrated dispute with Newman, in which Kingsley was badly worsted. Partly by the number of scrapes he got himself into, it is fair to say that he stood on the marge of being an eminent Victorian.

The variety of his writings is testimony enough to the breadth of his interests. His anti-Roman, anti-ascetic side finds expression in *The Saint's Tragedy* and *Hypatia*, and the other side of this coin in *The Hermits*. The Christian Socialist appears in *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*; and the sanitary reformer in *Two Years Ago* and *Health and Education*. The scientist writes *Glaucus; or the Wonders of the Shore*, *Madam How and Lady Why* and *Town Geology*. *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake* express the patriot; *The Roman and the Teuton*, *Historical Lectures and Essays* and *Plays and Puritans*, the historian; eleven volumes of sermons, the parson; and the introductions to the translation by Susanna Winkworth of the *Theologica Germanica* and to Tauler's *Sermons*, the mystic. Besides these there are books by Kingsley on a trip to the West Indies (*At Last*), translations of Greek myths (*The Heroes*), a book on early Alexandrine Neo-Platonism (*Alexandria and Her Schools*) and the miscellaneous essays, reviews and literary criticism in *Prose Idylls* and in *Literary and General Essays*. Of them all *The Water-Babies* (1863) is a representative 'olla, or hotchpotch'.³

This diversity naturally lays Kingsley open to the charge of shallow amateurism: indeed, it was just such an attack that led him to resign his Cambridge professorship.⁴ That one of his essays was entitled *Phaethon: or Loose Thoughts for Loose Thinkers*, was

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seized on by the reviewers to his discredit.⁵ Kingsley, however, though he could be boorishly dogmatic, was no fool, and to most of his interests he brought a mind both keen and well informed. What he could not brook was any formal intellectual discipline. While at Cambridge he detested the systematic work required of him and longed to be 'free to follow such a course of education as Socrates, and Bacon, and More, and Milton have sketched out' (CKL, I, 51). He left the Christian Socialists in 1852 because they became an institution.⁶ At the same time his interests and convictions (if we exclude those basic to his scientific bent and his faith, and certain *idées fixes*) can have the air of crazes or temporary fads. Of the Bristol Riots of 1831 which Kingsley witnessed (he was then at school in Clifton), he could say variously in later life, 'what I had seen made me for years the veriest aristocrat', and 'That sight...made me a Radical' (CKL, I, 22, 308); and in neither case was this hypocrisy, because he believed passionately, if momentarily, in whatever he was saying.⁷ Similarly, he could write to his wife-to-be in August 1842,

There are two ways of looking at every occurrence – a bright and a dark side... It is absurd, as a rational being, to torture one's self unnecessarily. It is inconsistent in a Christian to see God's wrath, rather than His mercy in everything... 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you.' By turning your mind from the dark view. Never begin to look darkly at a subject, without checking yourself and saying, 'Is there not a bright side to this? Has not God promised the bright side to me?' (CKL, I, 86)

and again after their marriage, in 1844,

I will never believe that a man has a real love for the good and beautiful, except he attacks the evil and the disgusting the moment he sees it!... It is very easy to turn our eyes away from ugly sights, and so consider ourselves refined. (ib. 121)⁸

Kingsley recognized this weathercock habit in himself. Once he tried to distinguish between 'opinions', which may change, and 'convictions', which do not (ib. 68); later he claimed that 'my ideas [are] getting developed, and "fixed", as the Germans would say', but continued 'alas! as Hare has it, is not in one sense "every man a liar?" false to his own idea again and again, even if, which is rare now-a-days, we have one?' (ib. 138). Elsewhere he redefined and praised 'enthusiasm' and 'impulse' (ib. 102–3).

The same is largely true of his friendships. He attacks people;

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they reply courteously; and he rushes into wild friendliness towards them; and vice versa. He overvalued J. M. Ludlow at first before he knew him properly, and blew hot and cold over Carlyle; threw himself into a comradeship with the naturalist P. H. Gosse, and just as unthinkingly out of it; abused the poet Martin Tupper before going out on a fishing trip with him, after which they were firm friends; attacked Ruskin, but when told how much the man admired his views on art, was contrite, and wrote to Furnivall that this 'made me a little ashamed of myself, for I certainly have not spoken of Ruskin as he has spoken of me, & I fear I have been very unjust to him'.⁹ Not surprisingly, Kingsley ended his life having lost nearly all the friends of his earlier days except for Maurice and Froude.

Diversity, volatility – and uncertainty: even those views to which he held, Kingsley often held with a deliberate short-sightedness, 'Some things I see clearly, and hold with desperate clutch' (*CKL*, I, 468; see also II, 218). W. E. Houghton has shown how he tried to silence his doubts by such common Victorian expedients as insistence on hard work and duty, hero-worship and outbursts of Philistinism:¹⁰ thus he could say to his curate, 'do not darken your mind with intellectual puzzles, which may breed disbelief, but can never breed vital religion, or practical usefulness' (*CKL*, II, 131), or, writing to his fiancée,

Use your senses much, and your mind little. Feed on Nature, and do not try to understand it. It will digest itself. It did so when you were a baby the first time! Look round you much. Think little and read less! Never give way to reveries. Have always some employment in your hands... When you are doing nothing at night, pray and praise! (*CKL*, I, 89–90)

The result of this can be a lack of substance in professed faith: it is thus not strange to hear Kingsley speaking of 'the curse of our generation... that so few of us deeply believe anything'; with the search becoming one for any certainty, no matter what, willed belief takes the place of conviction:

My friend, we must pray to God to give us faith; faith in something – something that we can live for, and would die for. Then we shall be ready and able to do good in our generation. Our fixed ideas will be to us Archimedes' fulchra in space, from whence, if need be, he could move the world. Get hold of some one truth. Let it blaze in your sky, like a Greenland sun, never setting day or night. Give your soul up to it; see it in everything, and everything in it... (*CKL*, I, 141; cf. 138)¹¹

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It has been said of Kingsley that, 'like Proteus, you can never catch the whole of him':¹² but the problem was as real for Kingsley himself. In what follows we must often be tentative. Sometimes his views (for example, those on natural theology and eternal punishment) remain fairly consistent; sometimes they are in equal opposition; sometimes one has more weight with him than another – the most important side of this last being the way he is readier to be unorthodox in private letters than in public sermons. This of course applies not only to any accounts of his extraliterary ideas, but to their realization in his art. Not one of his serious novels – *Alton Locke*, *Yeast*, *Hypatia* or *Two Years Ago*—has unity,¹³ and particularly in *Hypatia* there is damaging uncertainty of stance and sympathy.¹⁴

While it is, perhaps, of a piece with this last point that the book Kingsley dedicated 'To My Youngest Son, Grenville Arthur, and to All Other Good Little Boys' should be so often wholly beyond the comprehension of a child; or that of one of the central 'doctrines' he put into it he could write, 'I have worked out the theory till I quite believe it' (*CKL*, II, 137); yet nonetheless, in *The Water-Babies*, his only fantasy, it is also arguable that in a sense Kingsley's contradictions find themselves a natural home. Here, with the paternal authorial role, the need for axe-grinding was less intense: here he could carry his doubts more lightly; here too he had a form which would admit his multifarious nature without strain. The book was, his wife tells us, composed with 'rapidity and ease', 'if indeed what was so purely an inspiration could be called composing, for the whole thing seemed to flow naturally out of his brain and heart, lightening both of a burden without exhausting either; and the copy went up to the printer's with scarcely a flaw' (*CKL*, II, 137).¹⁵ If such detachment can sometimes produce flippancy, and if the relaxation may involve a sense of the lightweight, this book is nevertheless the one in which it can fairly be claimed that Kingsley comes nearest to finding himself, and the one in which he is at his most assured.

The Water-Babies

The story of this 'wonderful fairy tale' describes how Tom, a Yorkshire boy-chimney-sweep apprenticed to the cruel and drunken Grimes, is taken one day to a great mansion, Harthover House, to

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crawl through and clean the flue-system. Tom loses his way in the chimneys and finds himself in the room of the beautiful little girl Ellie. Catching sight of his black self in a mirror, he is horrified and in trying to get back up the chimney knocks the fire-irons down; this brings in Ellie's nurse, who starts a hue-and-cry. Tom, terrified, escapes from the house and flees, with all the retainers in pursuit; but helped (unknown to himself) by a strange Irishwoman, he eludes them and runs away over the moors, till after ten miles he comes to the brink of Lewthwaite Crag. Down this he goes, a thousand feet, and at the bottom he begins to think he hears church bells. He is helped by a kindly village schoolmistress, but when she leaves him temporarily, he goes in search of the source of the bells, which are still sounding in his head. All this while, the Irishwoman is following him. He comes to a river, and so hot, thirsty and dirty is he that he falls into it, and after two minutes' submersion has turned into a tiny water-baby. The Irishwoman, who is really the Fairy Queen, has meanwhile entered the water herself and warned her fairy subjects not to show themselves to Tom yet as he 'is but a savage now, and like the beasts which perish'; and, she adds, 'from the beasts which perish he must learn'; nevertheless, the fairies look after him till he is fit to see them. Meanwhile, Sir John, the squire of Harthover, and his men have traced Tom to the stream, and have concluded from the 'husk' they find there that Tom is dead.

Thus it is that for the next part of the book Tom spends his time in the river meeting minnows, caddis-flies, otters, dun-flies, trout, eels and dragon-flies. He teases them, is punished, and afterwards makes friends with them. One day there is a rain-storm and subsequent flood, in which Tom catches sight of little girl water-babies (fairies) 'floating down the torrent' singing, '“Down to the sea, down to the sea!”' He sets out after them. During his journey he passes Grimes and others poaching salmon by night: keepers suddenly set on them and in the struggle Grimes falls into the river and is drowned. Tom flees in terror of him. At last he comes to the sea and asks all manner of creatures – bass, pollock, sea-snails, a sunfish, porpoises, a giant eel and a lobster – whether and where they have seen any water-babies, but none can help him. He befriends the lobster. One day he is caught by one Professor Pttthmlnsprts (Put-them-all-in-spirits) who is looking after Ellie while she is convalescing at a seaside resort. The Professor will not,

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despite Ellie's insistence, admit that Tom is something unexpected in nature; and, refusing to call him a water-baby, tries to classify him variously as a Holothurian and a Cephalopod, upon which Tom grows angry and bites him. The Professor lets him go and he slips back into the water, but not before Ellie, in trying to stop him, falls and fractures her skull; shortly afterwards the fairies take her away. Back in the water, Tom finds his friend the lobster caught in a pot, and helps to free him. He then – as a reward, we are later told – meets his first water-baby.

Together with the water-babies he travels to the submarine fairy island of St Brandan. There he meets the greater fairies Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, who, as their names suggest, mean reward (or punishment) and conduct respectively; and as the first says of the second, ‘“she begins where I end, and I begin where she ends”’. Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid rewards by handing out sweets (sea-bulls' eyes and lollipops) and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, who comes only on Sundays, hugs armfuls of water-babies to herself. Tom is wicked again, however: he teases the sea-beasts and is punished by Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, and commits the far greater crime of raiding her larder for sweets; for this second offence he is punished by his body growing so prickly all over that Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby will no longer hug him. At this point Ellie, now a water-baby herself, is brought to help Tom, and gradually he reforms. Learning that she goes home ‘to a very beautiful place’ on Sundays, he longs to go there, though she herself does not know the way. Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid tells him, ‘“Those who go there must go first where they do not like, and do what they do not like, and help somebody they do not like.”’ She then tells Tom the story of the Doasyoulikes, who degenerated through sloth into apes before finally becoming extinct; warns him that his own story might have been similar, and packs him off to the Other-end-of-Nowhere to find and help Grimes, who is being punished there for his sins.

The remaining quarter of the book describes Tom's journey: first, via many creatures and places to the home of Mother Carey at Shiny Wall; and then, directed by her, beneath the sea-floor to the allegorical land of the Other-end-of-Nowhere, where at last he comes to a huge reformatory in which Grimes is forced to clean chimneys for himself. Tom tries to help Grimes, makes him weep and repent and pleads successfully that he may be released from

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his chimney to sweep the crater of Etna. Thereupon Tom is taken back up a wonderful 'backstairs' to St Brandan's Isle, and is reunited with Ellie. He is now rewarded by being able to go home with Ellie on Sundays 'and sometimes on weekdays, too'.

Style

The most striking feature of *The Water-Babies* – that compendium of 'striking features' – is the amount of what we can call for the moment irrelevance. There is much material in the book which has little relation to Tom and his history – as much, in fact, as takes up one quarter of the whole. There are, for instance, long descriptions of the curious architecture of Harthover House (20–3), the geological make-up of Vendale (45–9) or the structure of St Brandan's Isle (with history of the saint attached (193–6)). When Tom reaches the salmon river, Kingsley asks, 'what sort of a river was it?' He begins, 'Was it like an Irish stream...?', and there follows a page-long account of the nature of Irish streams, the quality of the fishing and the character of the ghillies; after which he proceeds in the same way to try Wales, Hampshire and Scotland, until after three pages in all, he announces, 'No. It was none of these; the salmon stream at Harthover' (117–22). Eight pages are spent elaborating Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid's punishment of Professor Ptthmlnsprts for his refusal to believe in the existence of water-babies, and on the preposterous remedies attempted by his doctors (165–78).¹⁶ Two pages are devoted to the history of the Mayor of Plymouth as illustration of the habitual refusal of lobsters to release their claws (185–9). A long account of the race of the Gairfowl is partly a satire on the rejection in March 1862 of Monckton Milnes' Bill concerning marriage to the spouse of a dead brother or sister (257–65). Indeed the whole book is scattered with topical references, which so dominate Tom's visit to the Other-end-of-Nowhere that few of the people and events there have any direct relevance to himself or his moral development.¹⁷

Practically every interest of Kingsley's seems to have found its way into this book. There is the Christian Socialist in the account of Tom's life as a sweep; the Tory in the way Kingsley's portrait half accepts the situation – *laissez-faire* blunting the radical edge. There is the nationalist in the constant references to Britain, particularly in the recurrent adulatory pictures of the hearty squire

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of Harthover, and in the descriptions of Tom as 'a brave, determined little English bull dog', or 'a little dogged, hard, gnarly, foursquare brick of an English boy' (138, 291; cf. 250, 278).¹⁸ We have the sanitary reformer in the pictures of the water-babies cleaning up the beaches, and of the sea-side resort to which Ellie is sent. And as for, variously, the geologist, the botanist, the zoologist, the theologian, the poet, the man of induction and the mystic, their presence is, as we shall see, pervasive.

This multiplicity is added to by the disparate contexts of the book. However many connections are made between one part and the next, the sheer qualitative differences among the worlds of mid-Victorian Yorkshire, underwater life, moral fairydom in St Brandan's Isle and allegorical topsy-turvydom in the Other-end-of-Nowhere, leave us reeling. No sooner are we settled in one world than we are jerked into another.¹⁹ Anyone reading *The Water-Babies* for the first time would have small suspicion after the first twenty pages or so on the social condition of chimney-sweeps, that he was about to be immersed in fairyland. And yet, strangely enough, the very violence by which the carpet is continually pulled from under us suggests that the method could be deliberate.

That Kingsley is at least partly following in the footsteps of his beloved Rabelais²⁰ is clear enough from the frequent use of listing. Whenever any nasty thing approaches St Brandan's Isle, for instance, there spring up hundreds of water-snakes set to guard it, armed with

a whole cutler's shop of

Scythes,	Javelins,
Billhooks,	Lances,
Pickaxes,	Halberts,
Forks,	Gisarines,
Penknives,	Poleaxes,
Rapiers,	Fishhooks,
Sabres,	Bradawls,
Yataghans,	Gimlets,
Creeses,	Corkscrews,
Ghoorka swords,	Pins,
Tucks,	Needles,

And so forth,

which stabbed, shot, poked, pricked, scratched, ripped, pinked, and crimped those naughty beasts so terribly that they had to run for their lives, or else be chopped into small pieces and be eaten afterwards. (198)

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The same linguistic ebullience can be seen in the descriptions of the moral of the story (88), or the medical remedies attempted on Professor Ptthmlnsprts (166ff.), of what Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid might have done to Tom when he had stolen the lollipops (222), or of the backstairs to St Brandan's Isle (341).²¹ This kinship with Rabelais does hint that Kingsley's apparent vagaries might be justified by the same aesthetic that lies behind *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Kingsley's way of removing his eye from the immediate object can also be seen in the detail of the book, for instance in the episode of Tom's escape from Harthover (29-35). We are given a long account of what each person who set out in pursuit of Tom was doing beforehand, and of the misfortunes that befell them from the interruption – the undergardener gashed himself on his scythe, the dairymaid fell over her churn and spilt the milk, the groom cleaning his master's horse let him go, 'whereby he kicked himself lame in five minutes' (30), Grimes overturned the soot-sack in the newly-gravelled yard, which was thus ruined, and so on. At the end of it, so far have we been taken from the central drama of the frightened Tom, that Kingsley can become flippant,

Only My Lady did not give chase; for when she had put her head out of the window, her night-wig fell into the garden, and she had to ring up her lady's-maid, and send her down for it privately; which quite put her out of the running, so that she came in nowhere, and is consequently not placed. (31)

The whole description affords entertaining contrast with Chaucer's account in 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' of the hue-and-cry after Reynard has seized Chaunticleer. And when Kingsley returns to Tom, he lets the cog of the narrative slip a little before engaging: he tells us that Tom 'paddled' over the park, 'like a small black gorilla fleeing to the forest', and then,

Alas for him! there was no big father gorilla therein to take his part; to scratch out the gardener's inside with one paw, toss the dairymaid into a tree with another, and wrench off Sir John's head with a third, while he cracked the keeper's scull [*sic*] with his teeth, as easily as if it had been a cocoa-nut or a paving-stone. (32)

Maybe the gorilla analogy prepares us for the likening of Tom to savage beasts, even perhaps for the significance of the Doasyoulikes, but the whole vignette, particularly the concluding analogy, is not to be justified in these terms: either Kingsley is being patronisingly

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nonsensical for his child readers, or else the nonsense has a real artistic function in his fantasy.

On the next page, describing how Tom made for the woods, Kingsley remarks, 'he was sharp enough to know that he might hide in a bush, or swarm up a tree, and, altogether, had more chance there than in the open', before going on to contradict himself, 'If he had not known that, he would have been foolisher than a mouse or a minnow.' We find a similar oddity a little later when he tells us that Tom was 'as cunning as an old Exmoor stag', and then asks, 'Why not? Though he was but ten years old, he had lived longer than most stags, and had more wits to start with into the bargain' (35). The technique – if it is a technique – seems to be to throw the reader out of the expectation that one thing will follow from another; to deny him, for a moment, the sense of forward movement in the main story. Thus, when Tom in his flight hits his head against the wall of the grounds, we have,

Now running your head against a wall is not pleasant, especially if it is a loose wall, with the stones all set on edge, and a sharp-cornered one hits you between the eyes, and makes you see all manner of beautiful stars. The stars are very beautiful, certainly: but unfortunately they go in the twenty-thousandth part of a split second, and the pain which comes after them does not. And so Tom hurt his head; but he was a brave boy, and did not mind that a penny. . . (34–5)

The story simply stops, while we speculate on bumps.

Most critical commentaries on Kingsley in general or *The Water-Babies* in particular have fastened on his style. Thus, for example, W. J. Dawson, 'He never attains the great artist's sane and gracious vision of the proportion of things';²² or Stephen Paget, '[Kingsley] was attempting impossibilities: he put-in everything, he left-out nothing';²³ or Edward Wagenknecht, 'He was a man who lived largely on his enthusiasms and emotions, and his imagination was quite undisciplined.'²⁴ W. R. Greg is

sure that he writes as he thinks, hastily and inconsiderately. His rattling, random, galloping, defiant style irresistibly conveys the impression of a man of overflowing mind coming in from a breathless burst with the fox-hounds, rushing to his desk with muddy boots, battered hat, and disordered dress, and dashing off with vast rapidity the teeming fancies suggested to him by a brisk circulation and a fertile and vivid brain. He is essentially an *improvisatore* – an extempore writer. His luxuriance is marvellous; but he never prunes or tones it down. . . . He wants respect for his readers, for his art, and for his own powers. . . . He 'goes in' for quantity rather than quality. . . .²⁵

All these comments suppose quite simply that Kingsley had no

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control over his work. The truth of the matter – at least in the case of *The Water-Babies* – may however have been otherwise.

The context and the creatures of the book are all natural: nature is, after all, Kingsley's immediate interest – his final one being the demonstration of God's presence therein. Tom is first presented to us in Victorian Yorkshire, and although his subsequent travels take in St Brandan's Isle off the West Coast of Ireland (for Kingsley the lost Atlantis),²⁶ the Peacepool of Mother Carey in the Arctic, and the Other-end-of-Nowhere which, in a pre-Vernean manner, is at the centre of the Earth, these *terrae incognitae* are still *terra firma*. Kingsley never takes his fairy-tale into another world or dimension.²⁷ The 'home' to which Ellie goes on Sundays is heaven or an antechamber of it; but the reported account of it, which is all we are given, is even more reticent than that of MacDonald's Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind*: Ellie can tell Tom no more than that it is 'a very beautiful place', and Kingsley comments, 'those who have been oftenest in it, or even nearest to it, can say least about it, and make people understand least what it is like' (281). Even the terrestrial remoteness of the fairies is only apparent. They are put where they are so that our disbelief in them may be the more readily suspended; all of them are in fact personifications of principles which inform existence at all times and places.²⁸

Kingsley uses elaborate inductive arguments to make Tom and the other water-babies a part of the natural order. Thus, for example, citing creatures like the green drake, the alder fly or the dragon-fly which live under water before they change their skins, he asks 'And if a water animal can continually change into a land animal, why should not a land animal sometimes change into a water animal?' (76). Metaphysical attributes are constantly translated into physical: to prove the existence of fairies a real possibility, Kingsley uses the inductive argument at the end of Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794),

There is life in you; and it is the life in you which makes you grow, and move, and think: and yet you can't see it. And there is steam in a steam engine; and that is what makes it move: and yet you can't see it; and so there may be fairies in the world... (60-1)²⁹

Similarly, when Tom falls in the stream and becomes a water-baby, the process is one whereby his soul, which like steam or fairies cannot be seen but exists within nature, discards the old body and