

# Landscapes with Dragons and Angels

## Finding the Wise Imagination in Children's Literature

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Fantasy writing for children, in the form of novels or films, not to mention video and computer games, is at the present time both immensely popular and hugely influential. What does it matter if a child's imagination is preoccupied with pictures of wizards and superheroes, hobbits and daemons, walking trees and talking animals, or scenes of brutal conflict in alternate universes? For some, these are harmless amusements, a welcome and necessary release from the stresses and anxieties of real life. Many Christians believe there is a more sinister aspect to much recent fantasy fiction, which is held to entice impressionable young minds towards the Dark Side and open them to the influence of the Occult. But any sober assessment of the significance of fantasy should really begin with a reflection on the nature and role of the imagination in human life, and here I will draw on the work of the Inklings—a well-known group of scholars and fantasy writers who came together in Oxford in the 1930s and were responsible for several of the most currently influential works of fantasy. I also refer the reader to an important and influential book by the Catholic writer Michael O'Brien, *A Landscape with Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind*, whose early chapters make a persuasive case for the importance of fantasy in the child's moral development, and the obligation of parents to be both vigilant and discerning.

One of the most characteristic ideas of the Inklings—and of the extended group of writers associated with them, including George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton—is the importance of the creative imagination, and its capacity for the symbolic. In his great work *Sources of the Self* the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes:

The creative imagination is the power which we have to attribute to ourselves, once we see art as expression and no longer simply as mimesis. Manifesting reality involves the creation of new forms which give articulation to an inchoate vision, not simply the reproduction of forms already there. That is why the Romantic period developed its particular concept of the symbol. The symbol, unlike allegory, provides the form of language in which something, otherwise beyond our reach, can become visible. Where the allegorical term points to a reality which we can also refer to directly, the symbol allows what is expressed in it to enter our world. It is the locus of a manifestation of what otherwise would remain invisible. [...] This concept of the symbol is what underlies the ideal of a complete interpenetration of matter and form in the work of art. (379)

As Taylor notes, the “symbol” as understood in Romanticism enables an interpenetration of matter

and form: the symbol becomes the manifestation in matter of a particular form or *logos*. If each and every created thing is seen as a symbol of its own interior essence, the world becomes a radiant book of symbols to be read with eyes sensitive to spiritual light.

Romanticism had found a new way of expressing what was, in fact, a very traditional idea. For in much of ancient thought, reality has several layers or levels, and so does the soul. Above the level of everyday experience and feeling and thought is the level of the *Nous poetikos* or active, spiritual intelligence, opening on to and informed by the realm of archetypal Ideas – whether these are conceived as existing in their own realm, or in the Mind of God, or are personified as Angels. Below that is realm of the soul proper, and below that the body. Within the soul, Memory preserves the images that come to us through the senses, Imagination manipulates them, and Reason tries to make sense of them. This vital interaction, over which the Will presides as the active counterpart of Memory, provides for the process of creativity which is the birth of human culture.

Since the soul is an intermediate reality, located between body and spirit and interacting with both, in symbolism we have the capacity to express the higher, archetypal realities in the language of the soul, clothing them, as it were, in images derived from the senses, images of things in the physical world. Thus ancient and medieval thinkers were quite accustomed to thinking in symbolic terms, believing as they did in a world of invisible realities that could be expressed in visible images.

### **Discernment in the Arts**

The soul's imaginative faculty mediates between the sensory and the intellectual world. But like all mediators it is ambiguous. It has two sides or faces, depending on its relationship to the higher spiritual faculty of Intuition. When the imagination faces *upwards* towards the archetypes of reality, assisted by the *Nous*, it is capable of mediating and transmitting truth, as it does in the true visions received by prophets, and also in the works of the great artists and poets.[1] In such cases the “matter” that it receives from the senses and holds in the memory is transformed and raised up into a symbolic form, luminous with the reality of the higher world. In the visual arts one sees this most clearly, perhaps, in Byzantine icons.

But when the eyes of the imagination are turned *downwards*, away from the archetypes in God's Mind or the Logos, the result is to dissolve and obstruct our perception of truth, leading us away from a world of order into a desolate and chaotic landscape of shadows. Some of the less uplifting products of the surrealist and expressionist movements in art might provide examples of this. Fantasy writings that are oriented in this direction leave the soul feeling bereft, melancholy or even

unclean. An extreme example would be pornographic images, which focus the mind on the human body as such (or parts of it), virtually excluding any consideration of the spiritual dimension of the person as a whole.

Implicit in what I have been saying is the traditional theory of *askesis* or spiritual purification, according to which human desire must be progressively redirected. From facing downward it must be turned towards the light, the only direction in which true human fulfilment is possible. The Imagination is therefore an arena of spiritual warfare. [2]

Reason also has two faces. Like the Imagination it imposes a kind of order upon the world of the senses, connecting and uniting things in a certain way. But again there is a big contrast between a rationality that is open to the truth which transcends it, and one that is closed. If its face which should be turned towards the higher light is darkened, the workings of reason may produce arguments and conclusions which, while logical enough in their own way, bear little relation to the integral truth. G. K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* described a madman not as someone who has lost his reason, but as one who has lost everything *except* his reason. The conspiracy theorist, the paranoiac, the solipsist, the materialist—all have this in common: their reasoning faculty has become detached from the other faculties of the soul and is running wild.

It is worth noting that this theory goes some way towards keeping in balance two important but “contradictory” elements in the Christian tradition on Imagination. The Christian mystic knows that God is unknowable—except by God. His path leads beyond all that can be known, and all that is perceived, in the world or in the imagination. “Because every thought enters the heart in the form of a mental image of some sensible object,” writes St Hesychios the Priest in the *Philokalia*, “the blessed light of the Divinity will illumine the heart only when the heart is completely empty of everything and so free from all form”. And according to St John of the Cross, “Since God is unincluded in any image, form or particular knowledge, the soul in order to be united with Him should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge”. Yet St John of the Cross was one of the greatest of Spanish poets, and in his own writing demonstrates both sides of the Christian “contradiction”. Images may be an obstacle, but they can also conduct us to the threshold of the Formless. The final defeat of the Iconoclasts in A.D. 843 vindicated the theologians who defended the use of the image as a means of access to the unknowable God who had made himself a worldly, and human, form.

To summarize: the Imagination is situated in a hierarchy of levels and may face either way. When correctly oriented in accordance with sanctity, it *incarnates the Invisible* in such a way as to unite us with God, who transcends the material.

## Discernment in Literature

The same principles apply to the writing of fantasy, of fairy-tales. But distinctions need to be drawn between different types of fantasy writing. For example, in an essay that appeared in a collection of essays called *The Common Man*, G. K. Chesterton distinguishes the tradition of J. M. Barrie, A. A. Milne and Robert Louis Stevenson, which he calls the tradition of the “Fabulists,” from that of Walter de la Mare and William Blake, whom he calls “Symbolists”. The first tradition involves make-believe, the construction of an illusion, of “radiant and refreshing dreams” or else instructive allegories. The second engages the imagination in representing and evoking intuitions and glimpses of a really-existing Otherworld. The second was the truer or larger world, the more “realistic” world.

Both Fabulist and Symbolist construct and explore alternative worlds. Both types of writing are popular. What makes the difference between them a bit clearer is touched upon by C. S. Lewis in the course of an essay about the novels of Charles Williams, when he comments on books which are speculations about “this everyday world [as] invaded by the marvellous”. In each case a “frontier” between worlds is violated, he says; but the Fabulist is ultimately interested in this violation or invasion as a device for learning about the world on *this* side of the frontier, or for enriching our appreciation of it—for example, by helping us see it as though for the first time, or from an alien point of view. The Symbolist is equally or more interested in what lies on the other side of the frontier, because he believes that it really exists in its own right, even if it can only be teasingly glimpsed from here, or no more than momentarily evoked in the story.

The categories may be further subdivided according to the spiritual orientation of the writer “upwards” or “downwards”—that is, towards or away from the principles of Order and Form, the Archetypes. In other words, one may have a wholesome and spiritually uplifting Fabulist, just as one may have a degenerate and corrupting Symbolist. It is, however, not always easy to consign a particular story or author to one category or another. The Fairyland of the Fabulist may speak to us of a real Otherworld that its author hardly suspects. This is for the simple reason that the traditional ingredients he uses to construct his tale owe a great deal of their literary power to the fact that they are themselves symbols, regardless of the frame in which they are set. Besides, if the *ethos* of a tale is sound, no matter if it is a Fable, it will bear some fragrance of a higher world within it.

On the basis of these considerations, we might devise a spectrum, with consciously Symbolic literature at one end, Naturalistic fiction at the other, and Fables of various sorts in the middle—these being shot through with glimmers from the other world yet primarily intended by the author to illuminate this one. Then one might add a series of layers indicating the tendency of the story to direct our attention in a “vertical” dimension, upwards or downwards:

	Symbolist	Fabulist	Naturalist
Spiritual	.....	.....	.....
Moral	.....	.....	.....
Idyllic	.....	.....	.....
Idolatrous	.....	.....	.....
Demonic	.....	.....	.....

There is nothing absolute about this classification. George MacDonald prefers to speak of the “wise imagination”. Joseph Schwartz distinguishes the natural imagination which is “materialistic” or this-worldly from the romantic—otherwise called utopian, idyllic, or idealistic—the moral, or ethical, and finally from the spiritual—which is also called sacramental or christological. A simpler scheme is suggested by Michael O'Brien, where he divides children's culture into four moralistic categories: (1) entirely good, (2) fundamentally good but disordered in details, (3) fundamentally disordered but appearing good on the surface, and (4) blatantly evil or rotten to the core.

As I understand it, the “moral” and “spiritual” imagination is actively engaged when the work is driven by a desire for the mysterious Transcendent to which truth, beauty and goodness conduct us. The “idyllic” imagination is concerned with beauty detached from the other transcendentals (truth and goodness). It is more self-indulgent—a type of wishful thinking or daydream, though it may still be concerned either with this world—as is in the case of the Naturalist or Fabulist—or with the next, as in the case of the Symbolist. Its object is not truth so much as pleasure. One level down from this, the “idolatrous” imagination is not merely neutral towards truth but actively directed against it, since it is focused on a false absolute. The “demonic” imagination goes even further, completely reversing the moral order. In each case, however, it is the question of whether an author is primarily concerned with this world or another that determines the horizontal categorisation of his or her work according to the above table.

Edith Nesbit would count as a Fabulist, as would Lewis Carroll and William Morris, along with Robert E. Howard, whose *Conan the Barbarian* gave birth to the popular genre known as “sword

and sorcery.” Most science fiction and most types of allegorical writing are Fables. The Inklings, on the other hand, belong to the Symbolist tradition, together with George MacDonald—though one can trace the influence of E. Nesbit on Lewis and James Barrie on Tolkien, and even of MacDonald on Carroll. Chesterton’s contemporary Lord Dunsany, the Irish nobleman who wrote *The King of Elfland’s Daughter*, is slightly more challenging to categorize. I would put him with MacDonald, since he possesses the ancient Celtic gift for symbolic thinking, even if his stories are pretty enough for fable.

The great popularity of Philip Pullman’s anti-Christian trilogy *His Dark Materials* makes them a particularly suitable subject for scrutiny by anyone concerned with the direction of our culture. Despite their anti-Symbolist agenda and the fact that Pullman has been described as being, as Blake suggested of Milton, “of the Devil’s party,” the books in the *Dark Materials* trilogy are less “demonic” than they are “idyllic,” and at times even “moral.” They construct a dream which is both a sort of allegory referring to the “real” world, thus a Fable, and a fantasy about how things ought to be. Pullman wants us to imagine a world in which there is no divine Authority worth obeying, where we must build our own “Republic of Heaven.”

The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling I would place in the category Symbolist-Moral, or perhaps even Symbolist-Spiritual, whereas the Twilight vampire novels of Stephanie Myer, the Mormon housewife, with their strongly erotic overtones, would be Fabulist-Idyllic or (at worst) Fabulist-Idolatrours.

## **Subversion**

One of the points made by Michael O’Brien in his book *Landscape with Dragons* is that much contemporary fantasy writing plays with and even distorts or reverses the traditional archetypes of mythic or folkloric imagination. Dragons, for example, are turned into ideal pets, and ogres or trolls are discovered to have been merely misunderstood. O’Brien sees this as extremely dangerous – as though the simple distortion of a conventional archetype could “turn” a fantasy against the light, reversing its spiritual effect. I am not so sure of this. The archetypes are always somewhat ambiguous, and the role they play in a particular story depends partly on the tendency and meaning of the story as a whole. Dragons, for example, conventionally represent pride and greed: the enemy of man. But they also represent a kind of natural energy—for example in Chinese mythology—and as such the taming of a dragon might in a particular context symbolize the triumph over our lower nature, or the necessary integration of certain forces of the personality. Vampires are pure evil in Bram Stoker, but in Stephanie Myer they have been transformed into something much closer to Tolkien’s Elves – though flawed with an unfortunate tendency to lust after human blood. Myer’s

fables, and Christopher Paolini's dragonrider sagas (*Eragon*, *Eldest*, etc.), borrow psychological energy from the archetypes, yet change the images in such a way as to evacuate much of their spiritual meaning. So the heroic (vegetarian) vampire avoids the sunlight not because it will render him to dust, but because it makes his skin sparkle in such a lovely way people that might notice. This is not to "befriend" the evil vampire, but to turn him into something else.

Michael O'Brien gives a good example of a children's fantasy film that many Christians would regard as actively subversive. Called *DragonHeart*, it features a Prince whose life is saved by sharing the heart of a good Dragon. He grows up to become a monstrous tyrant, and the only way he can be defeated and killed is for the Dragon to sacrifice its own life. With the inclusion of a foolish and corrupt Catholic priest as one of the characters, and a mythological back-story about dragons being the guardians of mankind, the film puts the Dragon firmly in the place of Christ and clearly echoes Gnostic and (according to O'Brien) Satanist beliefs. He cites other examples of Gnosticism in cinema, including Disney movies such as *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, and George Lucas's *Star Wars*. Nevertheless, even in the case of *DragonHeart*, it is not clear to me whether a film so obviously designed to undermine Christianity or offer an imaginative alternative to it will necessarily have the desired effect on its viewers. My own experience of the New Age suggests that while for some, anti-Christian groups and beliefs can serve as stepping-stones away from orthodox belief and morality, for others they may offer a path in the opposite direction. It all depends what one is looking for, and that is partly determined by some very early experiences indeed.

There is a further consideration, too. Most popular stories, however Gnostic in their tone or mythological trappings, seem to include certain key elements – the triumph of virtue over vice, the attainment of heroism through a preparedness for self-sacrifice, the priority of truth and justice – which keep us engaged with the characters, and these tend to point in a direction very different from that of the story as a whole, or other parts of the story. This is so even when – as is so often the case with stories emanating from Hollywood – these elements are mingled with others much less wholesome, and are themselves only glimpsed within what is indeed a fundamentally "disordered" work. I suspect it may not be as easy as one might think to invent a myth that points unambiguously in what I have called a *downward* direction. Or, at any rate, if it points that way it will do so less effectively than good stories point upwards. (The original Gnostic myths are hardly appealing on any level.) Evil is not a positive or coherent; it is a diminution of order in the direction of chaos, and depends for its power on the good. To think otherwise is to accept a dualism that is foreign to Christianity. In the field of children's literature, that is a reason for cautious optimism.

Those modern philosophers who rejected metaphysics almost cut the ground from under reason itself. But metaphysics has re-entered through the back door. Some fantasy literature has rediscovered spiritual light and meaning not through mere abstract thought, but in the world of the imagination. That is to say, through *poetry*, through *images*, through *music*, through *beauty* and through *story* it has revealed the presence of an invisible spiritual world implicit in the visible. The current popularity of fantasy seems to me at least partly due to a hunger for the meaning and truth that are to be found in history, in drama, in heroism—living images which reveal glimpses of a higher reality, a spiritual reality. Of course, much fantasy is sheer escapism – but, as Tolkien and Lewis pointed out, even escape is a noble aim for the man imprisoned unjustly, or consigned to world without apparent meaning. We should be delighted that our children are hungry for meaning and truth, and try to place in their path the books that will nourish them. The junk food they find along the way will not necessarily harm them, provided it is not all they eat. What I have tried to do is provide a framework that may help to make the discernment slightly easier, but this is only a suggestion, and parents must ultimately make their own decisions. If they judge according to instinct and common sense, I trust they will not go far wrong.

## NOTES

[1] The Aristotelian-Thomistic account of human knowledge that we inherit from the Middle Ages suggests a role for the Spirit in illuminating the phantasms or images drawn from the senses that form the basis for all our mental concepts. The Active, or Agent, Intellect turns the phantasm or sensible image of a thing into a meaningful concept that effectively and symbolically represents the intentional Form of the thing. The spiritual faculty responsible for this process of abstraction has often been described metaphorically as an “active light” within the human intelligence. I see this as a way the archetypal world is able to inform the Soul’s reasoning faculty, or at least its power of abstract thought, which then expresses itself culturally in the work of the scientist and philosopher. But since it also informs the Soul’s *imaginative* faculty, it seems to me necessary to extend this theory by dividing the spiritual function into an “active imagination” as well as an “active intellect”, in this way enabling us to see the work of poets and artists as parallel to philosophers and scientists.

[2] By contrast, for Plato imagination in the sense of *eikasia* is one of the lowest faculties of the soul, the images it engenders being mere “copies of copies” of the supreme Forms. The imagination in this sense *always* leads us away from the Forms towards dissipation and unreality. This is why, comparing them to the direct contemplation of truth, Plato condemns poetry and the arts in general, despite the fact that his own oeuvre necessarily takes an artistic form. There is, nevertheless, some talk in Plato of a more positive function for the imagination in the sense of *phantasia*, which can serve as a ladder in the reverse direction with the guidance of reason, and also some mention of the divinely-inspired images and visions which, unlike the images produced by ourselves, are conducive to truth. In *De Anima* Aristotle gave yet more scope for a theory of the imagination, and the Islamic authors influenced by the Greeks extend this even further into a full-blown visionary epistemology.

This article was based on my contribution to the book *Towards or Back to Human Values: Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Contemporary Fantasy*, ed. Marek Oziewicz and Justyna Deszcz (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006). For further reading online see [www.secondspring.co.uk/fantasy](http://www.secondspring.co.uk/fantasy).