Towards or Back to Human Values?
Towards or Back to Human Values?
Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Contemporary Fantasy

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS
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INTRODUCTION

JUSTYNA DESZCZ-TRYHUBCZAK
AND MAREK OZIEWICZ

Towards or Back to Human Values? Spiritual and Moral Dimension of Contemporary Fantasy is a theme formulated so as to reveal a bias and provoke a discussion. The bias is clear in our driving assumption that fantasy literature explores, among others, what it means to be a human being and what constitutes the essence of our humanity. Both of these issues are highly relevant especially now, when life in Western cultures is almost universally experienced as a rapid flux of changing identities, upgradeable technologies, and personal challenges to reinvent oneself in response to the needs of the market. While the seeming randomness of life and the constant pressure to give “becoming” priority over “being” works against the conception of human being and human values as stable concepts, we think that fantasy literature asserts the need to look for those on a personal and collective level.

The papers in this collection discuss the issues that our theme raises. Although as academics living in the post-theoretical era we squirm in our professional skins at the thought of tackling such subjects as spirituality, ethics, or moral philosophy, the urge to bring them to the center of contemporary discussion about literature is almost irresistible. This desire stems from a dire need of our spiritually famished civilization to rethink the way we deconstruct ourselves as moral agents and responsible human beings in the rapidly globalizing world, which actually demands from us even more responsibility, ethical sensitivity and moral commitment than ever. Explored by specialists in a number of fields, the pressing issue of how we conceive of ourselves—with all its resulting consequences—has broad social and cultural implications which go beyond merely literary-theoretical discussions.

The problems generated by the neglect or disregard of human values and personal integrity surface under many guises. Sociologists, such as Richard Sennett in his The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism (1999), speak of the reification that happens to people in an economy which destroys everything that gives meaning to human life and ruins “those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnish each with a sense of sustainable self” (27). Psychoanalysts and therapists, such as Brian Thorne in Infinitely Beloved (2003), describe the
appalling psychological consequences of “the perverse value system to which as a culture we have all but succumbed” (37); a system which churns out people who are “violent, self-denigrating, enraged, starved of validation, deprived of a sense of their own identity” (38) and ultimately burnt-out. Anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz in his Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics (2001), admit that late twentieth century developments, with their spin-offs including ethnic civil wars, linguistic separatism, the “multiculturization” of international capital, “have produced a sense of dispersion, of particularity, of complexity, and of uncenteredness [to the extent that] we […] are left with the pieces” (220). Philosophers, especially those associated with the school of sophia perennis, such as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Fritjof Schoun, and Titus Burckhardt—some of whose ideas can be found in Harry Orldsmeadow’s The Betrayal of Tradition (2005)—assert that the spiritual crisis of modernity is mostly due to the decline of “contemplative intellect” (12), itself a result of a modernist suppression of human intuitive, emphatic, and spiritual mode of consciousness. The protest against the application of materialist reductionism to all areas of life and against its cost to ourselves and our world has also been voiced in many other disciplines. Religious scholars, such as Mircea Eliade in his The Sacred and the Profane (1987); psychologists, such as James Hillman in The Soul’s Code (1996); physicists, such as Fritjof Capra in his The Turning Point (1982), chemists, such as James Lovelock in his Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth (2000), geoscientists such as Lynn Margulis in her Symbiotic Planet (1998), biologists, such as Rupert Sheldrake in his A New Science of Life (1995), not to speak of contemplative masters, such as Bede Griffiths in his A New Vision of Reality. Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith (1990)—all of them are convinced that there is more to human life than genetics and environment. Each in his or her own way asserts that there is an invisible mystery at the center of each person’s life—called spirit, destiny, soul, or some other name—and that it does matter whether we are true to ourselves or not.

Perhaps the most urgent debate on spirituality in the recent years has been carried out in the field of education. As Stephen Prickett and Patricia Erskine-Hill make clear in their collection Education, Education, Education (2002), the withering and sterility of contemporary education can be largely attributed to disregarding its spiritual, ethical and moral aspects. A former chairman of the U.K. Higher Education Foundation and President of the European Society for the Study of Literature and Theology, Prickett points out the disastrous impact that the accountability culture and managerial ethics have on all levels of education. Succumbing to what he calls “a hybrid (and sterile) vampire […] of sloppy and unquestioned assumptions” (181) in the form of managerial rhetoric has produced for us the belief that “education should serve the needs of the
labour market” (181). So conceived, education is totally misdirected. Instead of seeking to produce, as he puts it, “a quality of mind, or even life” (185) through nurturing imagination, empathy, understanding, knowledge, moral character, responsibility, appreciation, personal identity and the like, it leaves pupils barren, frustrated and confused. Recent discoveries about children’s spirituality, such as *The Spirit of the Child* (1998), the pioneering study of David Hay and Rebecca Nye, as well as studies on the validity of poetic knowledge that spiritual or holistic approach produces—such as James Taylor’s *Poetic Knowledge. The Recovery of Education* (1998)—suggest that the need for spiritual education today is as strong as our neglect of it has been so far.

While it is not our intention here to rouse the circles of educational administration to the cause of spiritual education, we are convinced that the reevaluation of objectives and methods in education has already been started in many places, usually as grassroots initiatives. In this process literary education—that is education through reading and discussing literature—is of no small account. For those of us who subscribe to a view that “the experiences of literature are connected in elusive and puzzling ways with those of everyday life” (Gribble 3), it is natural that “works of literature […] extend our awareness [and] structure our experience” (4). If that is so, they are, at least potentially, an education of the emotions and of the moral character. To those two points from James Gribble’s insightful *Literary Education* (1983) may be added others, most important of which would perhaps be the claim that literature has a potential to foster the moral imagination. Not only that; as Vigen Guroian convincingly argues in his *Rallying the Really Human Things. The Moral Imagination in Politics, Literature, and Everyday Life* (2005), imagination is a faculty which operates, usually unconsciously, in every human being. If it is not channeled properly, it seeks expression through its perverted forms that Guroian calls the idyllic, the idolatrous, and the demonic. The first of these is “primitivist, […] and escapist […] as it shirks its civic, social, and moral responsibilities” (56). Guroian associates it with the cult of false personal freedom and rebellion against all norms, so ubiquitous today. The second type—idolatrous imagination, which is a driving force of pop culture industry—is “deadly for the soul […] for it absolutizes the relative, then undermines the solid brickwork of the true norms of our humanity and the divine image within us, and puts in its place a foundation of sand and straw” (58). The third one, finally, is “the disenchantment that follows the self’s futile chase after happiness through the idyllic and the idolatrous imaginations” (59). Guroian explains:

The coordinates that track the fall of the Western self into the diabolic imagination are the loss of the concept of sin and the rise of popular therapeutic justifications and excuses for things that were once thought perverse. Moral norms are redescribed as values relative to self and culture. Human nature is
viewed as infinitely malleable and changing. Some go as far as to say that it is merely a social construct or fiction. Good and evil are considered matters of perspective. (60)

If Guroian’s perspective on the working of imagination is correct, as we think it is, each one of us is, in fact, left with a choice of either nurturing the moral imagination or allowing the other types of warped imagination to crowd it out. And it is in this endeavor that fantasy literature, called in the title of Richard Matthews’s 2002 book “the liberation of imagination,” can be of much help.

That fantasy literature may, indeed, be linked with spirituality, ethics, morality and the moral imagination is, by now, almost a cliché, and it is not surprising that the two most obvious contexts for the use of the word “quest” are a spiritual quest and a quest in fantasy. And yet, among dozens of collections on fantasy not one focuses exclusively on its spiritual and moral dimension. One reason may be the lack of agreement on what spirituality is and the general difficulty of confronting the subject in literary-critical discourse. This can be seen even in such excellent collections as Roger Schlobin’s pioneering *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (1982) or Kath Filmer’s *Twentieth-Century Fantasists. Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoetic Literature* (1992). Also, none among the collections on fantasy and the fantastic published in the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy series edited by Marshall B. Tymn has ever attempted to deal with the subject. The same is the case with monographs and studies on fantasy. Of the most important ones published to date, Eric Rabkin’s *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976), Diana Waggoner’s *The Hills of Faraway. A Guide to Fantasy* (1978), Ann Swinfen’s *In Defence of Fantasy* (1984), Martha Sammons’s “A Better Country”: *The Worlds of Religious Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1988) and Brian Attebery’s *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992)—consider spiritual aspects of fantasy to a certain degree. Two others—Millicent Lenz’s *Nuclear Age Literature for Youth. The Quest for a Life Affirming Ethic* (1990) and Kath Filmer’s *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth-Century Fantasy Literature* (1992)—propose some in-depth analyses of its ethical and spiritual signification. While in other areas of scholarly interest such a deficiency would be considered unacceptable, it has gone quite unnoticed in fantasy studies. This impoverishment is even more puzzling for anyone familiar with the critical writings of fantasists such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, Jane Yolen, Madeleine L’Engle, Stephen Lawhead and many others who assert that central to the affective power of fantasy is its potential for reawakening the sense of the spiritual dimension of human existence and enhancing the readers’ appreciation of what it means to be a human being.

The papers collected in this volume are a tribute to the fantasists whose works unleash their readers’ creativity and stimulate their moral imagination.
There are now a number of works of fantasy which open their readers’ eyes to the mystical and the spiritual, and encourage them to reflect on such issues as the interconnectedness of life, moral responsibility toward others and the natural world, and the applicability of ethical categories to human actions, words, and thoughts. At the same time, these essays are an attempt to theorize fantasy as a cultural phenomenon, a mode and a genre especially relevant to raise these issues. In view of a broad scope of our interest, reflected in the multiplicity of perspectives applied, we have divided this collection into four sections.

Section one, “Theorizing fantasy through mapping its spiritual territory,” looks at how considerations of spirituality and human values in the fantasy genre, as well as the ethical worldviews that they entail, may be contained in literary-critical discourse. In the first paper Marek Oziewicz cogently argues that much contemporary fantasy—especially mythopoetic or high fantasy—inclines to a thematic center consisting of explorations of human values and their validity for nurturing moral imagination, building a sense of personhood and shaping readers’ responses to the world of their daily experience. Through its subversion of a dominant today materialistic worldview, Oziewicz asserts, fantasy can be seen as moving towards or back to human values, with each mode approaching them differently but ultimately in a complementary way. This anti-materialist penchant of fantasy and its bearing on the evocation of spiritual states of being is then explored by Corinne Buckland. Supported by Rudolf Otto’s understanding of the transcendent aspect of imagination, Buckland ventures forth to show that the recent widespread interest in fantasy writers such as J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman may be attributed to a hunger for socially acceptable forms of the numinous. More importantly, she claims that grasping how the numinous is achieved in fantasy may provide critical insights into the nature and use of the genre’s affective power. Another treatment of the theme of spiritual potential of fantasy is dealt with by Melody and Richard Briggs, who explore fantasy’s alternative representations of reality, its systems of signification and its metaphoric discourse as elements conveying spiritual messages. They also relate their analyses of such authors as Pullman, Pratchett and Nix to various facets of contemporary Western cultural paradigm so as to show how fantasy replaces tradition in providing solutions to our existential dilemmas. One more approach to the question of the possible spiritual mission of fantasy, this time in the context of contemporary understanding of spirituality, is dealt with by Pat Pinsent. Contending that much modern children’s literature, and especially fantasy, has the aim of furthering the spirituality of its readers, Pinsent contrasts the rise of this type of books with the decline of “religious” children’s literature, often written in a realistic mode. Pinsent insightfully links the process with the fact that religion often seems to work as a barrier against the connectedness that spirituality involves and the
modern, multicultural world perceives as ethically desirable. Specifically how this redefined spirituality for our time may be employed as an ideological backdrop for fantasy series is investigated by Marek Oziewicz in the last paper of this section. Taking a close look at Madeleine L’Engle’s *Time Quartet*, Oziewicz suggests that the books may be seen as an example of how the application of spiritual principles, operating in a new paradigm, may assist humanity in the present transformation of consciousness and prove practical, soteriological, and fulfilling to individuals and civilization alike.

That fantasy can be a powerful tool for nourishing imagination and that, consequently, it should be seen as a serious cognitive strategy is demonstrated in this anthology by a number of essays, but especially by those gathered in section two, “Fantasy on the role of imagination in human life.” Stratford Caldecott accounts for the origins and the significance of fantasy for human spiritual growth by expertly reinterpreting the Romantic theory of imagination in the context of the Christian Platonist tradition and its correspondences with theoretical writings of the Inklings. Having analyzed both corruptive and morally formative operations of imagination as reflected in classical and new fantasy texts, Caldecott avers that just as the Romantics were driven by the need to envision gateways to the eternal reality, so modern fantasy writers aspire to reveal the mystery in the ordinary and help their readers to envision a spiritual reality. This longing can be satisfied only if reason resists the temptations of “demonic,” “idolatrous,” or “idyllic” imaginations and resorts to the aid of the moral imagination which can be found, among others, in certain works of fantasy. The conviction that humanity today is beset by the debasement of values remerges in the following essay, in which Corinne Buckland sets out to demonstrate what properties of fantasy prompt readers to reflect on morality and strive for virtue. Basing her argument on the distinction between the everyday understanding of goodness and the Good as a Platonic concept, Buckland shows how eloquently fantasy—for example through characters’ moral struggles and the readers’ vicarious involvement in them—communicates moral goodness. As Buckland concludes, fantasy may even dispel the lies we have chosen to live by. Among such deceptions is our contemptuous neglect of the customary and the mundane in our lives. Still, as Devin Brown demonstrates on the example of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, one of the subtest spiritual aspects of fantasy may be its sanctification of the ordinary. For Brown Tolkien’s preoccupation with the sacramental ordinary not only makes this issue an integral part of the template for most later fantasy, but also indicates the genre’s spiritual commitment to a re-sacralizing vision of the world of our everyday experience.

That certain generic features of fantasy narratives animate moral imagination has also been examined by Margaret Hiley, who discusses the importance of language as a powerful tool used by authors to construct Secondary Worlds and
thus to generate visions of spirituality to influence readers as they recreate these worlds in their minds. On the examples of Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* (1979) and Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* (2003), Hiley characterizes in detail the moral dimension of the use of language and the author-reader exchange, arriving at the conclusion that fantasy literature may teach us not only how to meaningfully reconstruct fictional universes but also how to accept and shoulder the individual moral responsibility for our Primary Worlds. In support of the edifying potential of fantasy, Marnie K. Jorenby discusses the Naoki and Yuko series by the Japanese author Miyoko Matsutani as texts belonging to the “back to human values” movement within fantasy, as defined earlier by Oziewicz. Matsutani’s young characters are taught to assume social responsibility for their environment through the guidance of the spirits of ancestors inhabiting the unseen otherworld and representing the values of the olden days. Still, it is up to the children to use them not only to rectify the past, but also to actively shape their own present and future.

Part three of the collection, “Fantasy as asserting interconnectedness of all life, stressing the need for cooperation, and fostering environmental awareness,” contains papers debating the growth of moral imagination and the search of values from various perspectives offered by ecocriticism. Of particular interest to the contributors to this section is the holistic understanding of the natural world as a harmonious and self-regulating system. To highlight the natural affinity between ideological concerns of the fantasy genre and ecocriticism, the opening essay by Piotr Skubała and Marek Oziewicz provides a historical review of the most fascinating recent changes in the way we perceive the natural environment. The authors argue that our conception of life on earth has moved from the conviction that nature is only “red in tooth and claw” to the belief that it operates by all-pervasive processes which link each living thing to its habitat. This perspective enables them to identify concerns shared by fantasy and ecological criticism, such as their aspiration to overcome rigid binaries in our perception of nature versus culture, human versus animal, and conscious versus unconscious forms of life. While Skubała and Oziewicz note that the academic establishment has persistently disregarded the study of fantasy just as it has marginalized ecocriticism as an interpretative tool in literary studies, the following two “green” readings of fantasy by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Maija-Liisa Harju can be seen as the attempts to remedy this predicament. The former discusses the parallel processes of developing ecological awareness and growing to moral maturity on the example of Hiromi Goto’s *Water of Possibility*, a fantasy coming-of-age novel located in a magical realm derived from Japanese folklore. Deszcz-Tryhubczak argues that fantasy ecofiction may guide young readers away from limiting anthropocentrism to the formation of an alternative value system defined within the consonance of individual human
lives and nature. Interestingly, just as Miyoko Matsutani, Hiromi Goto, a Japanese-Canadian author, also turns to folklore as a means of enhancing the spiritualizing workings of fantasy; both Matsutani’s and Goto’s works can thus be seen as confirming our conviction that the genre may return to traditional values even if it is written and read in search for new ones. Maija-Lisa Harju narrows down the ecocritical analysis of the genre to animal fantasy, and examines our predilection for anthropomorphism as a tool we use to distinguish between the human and the non-human. Having compared several examples of animal fantasy to realistic animal stories and biographies, Harju concludes that fantasy is a form particularly congenial to depictions of animal life. Not only does it encourage the perception of animals as individuals and species in many ways similar to us, but it also asserts that humans and animals are interrelated in a meaningful web of connections. In the final essay of this section Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak once more comments on the interrelatedness of species and the moral consequences of this concept. Believing that fantasy can show its readers the way toward an identity enriched by an acceptance of internal and external Otherness, Deszcz-Tryhubczak discusses Robin Hobb’s fantasy trilogies in which the protagonist’s encounters with the Others facilitates the readers’ reflection on the vitality of remaining “hospitable” to Otherness. Hence, as she claims, by attempting to overthrow the culturally sanctioned opposition between Self and Other, fantasy indicates a way towards tolerance and understanding in real life.

Section four of the collection, devoted to “fantasy as exploring human experience” in the context of dualisms we use to describe it—life versus death, chaos versus order, rationality versus intuition, fate versus free will, and the real versus the imaginary—comprises thematically varied papers. In one way or other, however, all of them suggest that fantasy expands our understanding of life, pushes us beyond these oppositions and shows us the ways to appreciate this fuller picture. That these categories often prove limiting or just inadequate is a claim substantiated by the opening essay, in which Dorota Guttfeld discusses the potential of fantasy to enable young readers to gain and deepen their understanding of death. As she shows in her analyses of the already classical fantasy cycles of Lewis, Le Guin, and Rowling, fantasy characters are often given a tempting chance of becoming immortal but usually turn it down as they realize that death is part of human life and a necessary step to what lies beyond. Mortality, in this light, no longer has to be endured as an inevitable end of existence, but rather looks like a condition that ensures that we shall not remain moored to one place forever. The fact that fantasy presents the characters’ careful choices of mortality tangibly, Guttfeld argues, makes it a practical means of asserting the importance of our decisions, and our acceptance of the human condition, in childhood, adulthood and even in death. In the
ensuing essay Mariusz Marszalski approaches Roger Zelazny’s *Chronicles of Amber* as a comment on another challenging issue which is objectivity versus relativity of moral norms and ethical codes. While Zelazny’s universe—structured as it is on quantum physics—is one of chaos rather than order, and inexplicability rather than comprehensibility, his protagonists always assert their own agency against powers which remain oblivious of human efforts. These choices, and the will to make them, suggest that even if the universe is blank, it is human responsibility to act morally and project a sense of order onto experience. In Marszalski’s reading of Zelazny’s cycle, the awareness of the dialectics of chaos and order, coupled with the adherence to values, is what must be seen as a constitutive feature of humanity. In the following essay, focused on Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, Max Payne continues the reflection on the ethical dilemmas faced by young people living in “a post-Christian age”: should they base their decisions on the dictates of tradition, religion and social institutions, or should they rather discover the moral law within themselves? As Payne notices, Lyra and Will’s romantic relationship, so subtly alluded to by Pullman, indicates that young people know very well that they ought to struggle for virtue individually, with the respect for themselves and others as the only valid criterion to follow. Moreover, as Payne observes, Pullman’s vision of moral growth, although seemingly contained within the constraints of scientific materialism, is clearly marked by “agnostic spirituality.” Significantly, the latter is in turn reconciled with modern science, another agenda in the trilogy. Payne concludes that the combination of these elements may alleviate the ethical crisis of the Western civilization, so frequently referred to in other essays in this volume. Analogously to Skubała and Oziewicz’s contribution, Marszalski’s and Payne’s essays reveal fantasy’s multifaceted influence on our lives through its connections with scientific, philosophical and theological concepts that remain outside the immediate scope of literary or cultural studies. In the penultimate essay of this section Robert A. Davies looks at Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift* with the view of assessing where they draw the line between free will and determinism—especially that imposed by larger, mythical structures within which humans act. As Davies’s detailed readings show, Garner is fully aware of the ambiguous legacy of any myth system, as both imbuing human existence with a sense of sacredness or the numinous and restricting human potential to imagine alternative patterns of life. Nevertheless, Davies argues, Garner goes beyond this dualism and asserts the possibility of autonomous redefining oppressive mythical structures as an invaluable means of individual self-interpretation and inner fortification. In the last essay of this section Joan Webb discusses the inter-relationship between the real and the imaginary in the world of the child as presented in David Almond’s *Skellig* and *The Fire-Eaters*. As Webb shows in her analyses, by focusing on the emotional predicaments of
both child and adult which stem from social and moral complexities of the
oppositions between life and death or free will and determinism, Almond makes
the reader participate in liminal experiences that contribute to a more profound
recognition of these aspects of our lives that cannot be comprehended through
reason. Davies’s and Webb’s essays are also precious voices in recent
discussions of contemporary British fantasy for children and young adults which
seem to marginalize works other than the Harry Potter series or *His Dark
Materials*.

Although this collection is by no means a definitive statement on fantasy as,
in the words of Roger Schlobin, “inherent in what we call humanity and
creativity” (xv), our hope is that it will encourage scholars interested in works of
fantasy and science fiction to examine them with more attention paid to their
ethical and value-oriented underpinnings. That the best works of modern fantasy
participate in the current debate on the status of human being in relation to
others, to the natural world, and to the universe is unquestionable; to what extent
literary criticism will bear witness to this fact—and thus, for example, help
promote the use of fantasy in education—remains to be seen. While numerous
questions concerning the development of the genre in response to new cultural,
social, and political paradigms still await answers, in the light of the essays
collected here, however, we are convinced that the potential of ethical criticism
of fantasy has already been tapped, and that the coming years will see a growing
awareness of the importance of works which assert the mythopoeic and value-
oriented construction of consciousness. With that in mind, we are thankful to the
authors for their patience, understanding and bearing with our idiosyncrasies as
editors. What redeems the effort of so many scholars which contributed to this
collection is our hope that these essays will turn as enriching for the readers as
they were for the editors.

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1 David Jaspers, in his Foreword to *Twentieth-Century Fantasists. Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature* writes: “[…] we live in an age which is deeply fascinated by the mysteries of spiritualities both Western and Eastern and the possibilities of the mystical experience. […] Fantasy literature allows us to break out of inherited traditions of ‘realism’—which are often simply subtle forms of coercion—and establish a vision of society beyond the impossible demands of post-modernity, and the economic and cultural traps of twentieth-century ideologies” (x). This is a very insightful remark and one could wish that the collection it opens focused more on this fascination with spirituality and mysticism as reflected in mythopoeic literature.

2 The same is the case about human values. Although the phrase sounds catchy and several books used it, they are usually a disappointment. A book by the title promising *Human and Anti-Human Values in Children’s Books* (1976), a collective work by Narcy Larrick and six other members of Council on Interracial Books for Children, speaks vaguely about “the demand for more a humane structure and more human values” (4), but at no point defines what they might be. Instead it focuses on racism, minority, sexism, elitism, ageism, materialism, individualism, escapism and conformism as they appear in children’s books, with the implication that when a given novel is value-neutral if it is “non-something-ism,” and is value-nurturing if it is “anti-something-ism” (4-25). Also a more recent collection by Joseph O’Beirne Milner and Lucy F. M. Milner *Webs and Wardrobes. Humanist and Religious World Views in Children’s Literature* (1987), although intended to “enhance the reader’s awareness of the deeper messages in children’s books” (x), is not much help in determining what human values might be. In fact, Milner’s presentation of the conflict between the old ethic and the new ethic—or of values rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition against values inherent in man-centered humanism—suggests a far stricter disparity between the two than is actually the case in modern children’s and young adult literature. As can be seen in the work of Philip Pullman, Madeleine L’Engle, David Almond and many other fantasists, most values cannot be associated exclusively to one or another worldview, while scientific rationality and a sense of spiritual mystery are not always at odds. The sense of conflict between the two that Milner points to is, perhaps, the result of the fact that he chooses to consider a religious perspective which, indeed, is at times at odds with modern humanism. Had he chosen to focus on a spiritual perspective, the most relevant worldview for many contemporary people, he
would be led to conclude that it blends the best that humanist and religious worldviews offer without sacrificing any of their strongest points.

3 Admittedly, there are some collections and studies—as well as many articles—which deal with spiritual, moral and ethical issues in certain fantasy novels, but they usually do so in the context of children’s literature. Such is the case with, for example, Sheila Egoff’s 1981 *Thursday’s Child*; Harrison and McGuire’s 1989 *Innocence and Experience: Essays and Conversations on Children’s Literature*; Millicent Lenz’s 1990 *Nuclear-Age Literature. The Quest for a Life-Affirming Ethic*, or Sandra L. Beckett’s 1997 *Reflections of Change. Children’s Literature Since 1945*, or Roni Natov’s 2002 *The Poetics of Childhood*. Perhaps the closest to our perspective, at least in intention, is James Higgins’s small study *Beyond Words. Mystical Fancy in Children’s Literature* (1970). In it Higgins argues that there are certain books for children which lead the reader forth “to share experiences beyond his immediate, tangible horizons” (1). As other critics before him, including Lewis and Tolkien, Higgins is however on his own when it comes to critical terminology appropriate to deal with his delicate subject, and the term he proposes for what we would now call mythopoeic or high fantasy is a strange sounding “mystical fancy.” Also his definition of the term—“modern fanciful literature which communicates with the inner child” (5)—is a bit awkward since it depends on his idiosyncratic definitions of “fancy,” by which he means modern fantasy literature, and “inner child,” by which he defines the imaginative, empathic, holistic and spiritual capacities of a human being.
PART I

THEORIZING FANTASY THROUGH MAPPING ITS SPIRITUAL TERRITORY
THE “TOWARDS” AND “BACK TO” HUMAN VALUES MOVEMENTS IN FANTASY FICTION

MAREK OZIEWICZ

When in 1982 Roger Schlobin wrote that “a strong case can be made for fantasy works as the most creative of imaginative arts” (xiv), he could not foresee how much fantasy as a literary mode would preoccupy the critics in the next decades. Still, he was convinced that “fantasy is inherent in what we call humanity and creativity” (xv). These two, humanity and creativity, have remained among the most discussed aspects of fantasy over twenty years after the publication of Schlobin’s inaugural collection. Although these terms can be approached from a variety of perspectives, and in each of those they may sometimes mean different things, I think that none of them would mean anything without the other. They are symbiotic inasmuch as creativity, and its twin imagination, has always been associated with the human potential. And it is in this context that I want to argue that the ebbs and flows of fantasy can be seen as a kind of literary consideration of “certain perennial powers and attributes of human existence” (Guroian x-xi), or as movements towards or back to human values.

As this paper will make clear, I am convinced that much contemporary fantasy—especially mythopoeic or high fantasy—inclines to a thematic center consisting of explorations of the so called “human values” and their validity for nurturing our moral imagination, building our sense of personhood and shaping our responses to the world of our daily experience. In line with Brian Atterbery’s conception of fantasy as a “fuzzy set” with a “clear center but boundaries that shade off imperceptibly” (12), I think that the genre’s evolution is not so much linear as circular—or spiral, to continue with the metaphor of physical motion—with the movement at the center which can be called either the path towards or the path back to this thematic core. This does not mean that the aim of fantasy is the realization of some moral objective; it does, however, mean that the genre’s affective power—whatever it may be—is contingent upon each author’s conception of human values as they operate or fail to do so in fantasy’s fictional world.
The “Philosophy” and “Ideology” of Fantasy

The question about the place of human values in fantasy could be paraphrased and split into several related issues, but in all cases it concerns the evolution of the genre, its characteristics, its driving impulse, and more generally the relationship between literature and morality or any value system. That this relationship exists is obvious. Most contemporary critics, no matter whether they subscribe to “imitative,” “expressive,” or “affective” theories of literature, agree that every act of writing, reading, or any other cultural performance, is ideologically charged and implies a confrontation between what is called the system of values, interpretative paradigm, worldview, or cognitive frame of the reader and that of the text. There are no ideologically neutral texts; as John Stephens avers:

> The significance deduced from a text—its theme, moral, insight into behaviour, and so on—is never without an ideological dimension or connotation. On the other hand, and less overtly, ideology is implicit in the way the story an audience derives from a text exists as an isomorph of events in the actual world: even if the story’s events are wholly or partly impossible in actuality, narrative sequences, and character interrelationships will be shaped according to recognizable forms, and that shaping can in itself express ideology in so far as it implies assumptions about the forms of human existence. (2)

The fact that Stephens’ *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* focuses on a specific class of literature, and that he prefers to use the term “ideology”—in his own words, “assumptions which determine a society’s sense of meaning and value” (1)—instead of “worldview,” “ethics” or “value system” is almost irrelevant. Since even the basic tool of literature, language, has been shown to operate as a system of signification permeated with ideology, the above conclusions seem to be valid for works of literature as well. The evidence can be found not only in critical assessments of individual authors or literary trends but also in works on literary theory such as Terry Eagleton’s classical now *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (1983), or Peter Barry’s more recent *Beginning Theory* (2002).

Neither Eagleton’s Marxist definition of literature as a consensus-generated value-judgment (16), nor Barry’s unprejudiced overview of modern literary theoretical approaches, nor Stephen’s definition of literary work as ideologically charged discourse, can escape from implying the existence of an ethical dimension of literature—regardless of how ethics or morality may be conceived. In fact, ethical assumptions have been inscribed in most modern theories of literature, with the difference that in some of them—for example liberal humanism, structuralism, feminism, Marxist criticism, ecocriticism, or
postcolonial criticism—they are more explicit than in others, such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, narratology, or even deconstruction. Although Barry avers that the rejection of the concept of “human nature” and the replacement of reading driven by moral convictions with a systematic, clearly defined approach to literary criticism lie at the heart of the fundamental conflict between liberal humanism and all modern theories, he is also aware—as theory is—that “all thinking and investigation is necessarily affected and largely determined by prior ideological commitment” (34). When one set of “objective” values, such as that implied in the liberal humanist “natural” approach to literature, is replaced by another system—whether it calls itself structuralism, deconstruction or postmodernism—with equal claims to investigative objectivity, the choice in fact amounts to ideological preference. This is why the conviction prevalent today that “the ethical approach to literature represents a highly effective ‘resistance to theory’ [… ]” must be called—according to Geoffrey Harpham in his essay “Ethics”—“a bad mistake” (401). For Harpham “ethics is, rather, the point at which literature intersects with theory, the point at which literature becomes conceptually interesting and theory becomes humanized” (401).

In Harpham’s opinion the latter part of the 20th century witnessed two distinctive periods of theorizing ethics and the ethical approach to literature. In what he calls the Theoretical Era (1968-87), it was believed that “in ethical discourse [… ] values and practices with no special claim to worthiness became normative” (388) and

virtually all the leading voices of the Theoretical Era (an era conspicuous for its deification of “leading voices”) organized their critiques of humanism as exposés of ethics, revelations of the transgressive, rebellious, or subversive energies that ethics had effectively masked and suppressed. And virtually all joined Derrida in seeing ethics as a combination of mastery and delusion. (388)

The period after 1987, by contrast, is defined by Harpham as one in which “ethics abruptly returned from its exile in a predeconstructive wilderness” (392)—albeit in guises such as Lacanian psychoanalytical ethics, Kristeva’s linguistic ethics, or Habermas’s and Lyotard’s versions of postmodernist ethics—and a period in which a “powerful interest in ethics among ‘literary’ theoreticians” coincided with “the appearance of several notable philosophical texts on ethics that drew heavily on the formal and conceptual resources of literature” (394). The total turnover was marked, as Harpham has it, by Foucault’s mind-boggling conversion to ethical humanism.

While the ideological upheavals of the Theoretical Era threatened to strip literature of its ethical relevance, fantasy was almost unaffected. Its ideological component, almost invariably comprised of moral assumptions, has always been
so evident in fantasy that most writers and the majority of critics have referred
to it in their attempts to define the genre, its characteristics and its driving
impulse. In his preface to the English translation of the tales of the Brothers
Grimm (1868), John Ruskin defines fantasy and fairy stories as “essentially
true” (Sandner 62) and giving their children readers “a teaching for which no
other can be substituted, and of which the power cannot be measured” (61).
George MacDonald’s “The Fantastic Imagination” (1890) defends the concept
of imaginative creation as a reflection of divine creation and sees fantasy as a
product of the Coleridgean higher faculty of imagination, as opposed to mere
fancy. MacDonald’s most important point is that the stories he writes are “new
embodiments of old truths” (65), central among which is the assumption that the
physical universe yields to moral laws and that “the laws of the spirit of man
must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent” (66). Also G. K.
Chesterton’s two influential essays “The Ethics of Elfland” and “Fairy Tales”
(both 1908) insist on the deeply transcendental core of all “mythic” and fantastic
narratives and on their serious moral and ethical character. The former essay
conceives of fantasy as stories which confirm the reader in the conviction that
the universe is governed by human actions and moral choices rather than by
cold mechanistic forces (Wolfe xix). In the latter Chesterton maintains that

   […] the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition […]
is the core of ethics […], of the nursery-tales [and…] of all folk-lore. All
happiness hangs on one thin veto; all positive joy depends on one negative. […]
All ethics ought to be taught to this fairy-tale tune; that, if one does one thing
forbidden, one imperils all the things provided. […] This is the profound
morality of fairy-tales; which so far from being lawless, go to the root of all law.
[…] Not only can these fairy-tales be enjoyed because they are moral, but
morality can be enjoyed because it puts us in fairyland, in a world at once of
wonder and of war. (qtd. in Sandner 72-3)

Equally strong claims about the deeply ethical and moral dimension of
fantasy are voiced in J. R. R. Tolkien’s seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories”
(1938). In it Tolkien defines the genre through extended description of its five
characteristics—these stories are true in the sense that they are serious, though
“not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” (40), and offer
four psychological functions to the reader: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and
Consolation, each pregnant with ethical implications. Fantasy, for Tolkien, is a
natural expression of the human spirit because we are the images of the creative
Maker (55). Recovery is a regaining of the Edenic freshness of perception which
makes us aware of how wonderful is the God-created world. Escape is the
expression of human desire for a return to our original and intended status in
Paradise with all that it involves, including immortality, which Tolkien
identifies as “our oldest and deepest desire” (67). Finally, Consolation is a specifically intense, improbable but miraculously true delivery from evil in the form of a happy ending compared by Tolkien to the joy of the Gospels, the Christian *Gloria*, which has “the very taste of primary truth” (72). Tolkien’s friend C. S. Lewis embraces the same Christian and value-based perspective. In “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” (1956) he insists that fantasy is a powerful means for spiritual reawakening and for the genuine enrichment of human life. In “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” (1952) he asserts that by feeding imagination, fantasy gives its readers a truer impression of the real world than most “realistic” literature (37-38). He also says that it is escapist in the positive sense of an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and that it is suffused with moral significance and life-altering potential. Most modern fantasy and science fiction writers would agree with that. Lloyd Alexander’s essay “Wishful Thinking—or Hopeful Dreaming?” (1968) defines fantasy as a “reality pretending to be a dream” (qtd. in Wolfe 39). Ursula Le Guin, in “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” (1973), sees fantasy as “a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence […] nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is” (*Language* 84). In her opinion fantasy, “instead of imitating the perceived confusion and complexity of existence, tries to hint at an order and clarity underlying existence” (87). This, of course, is a very tough task and the writer is always in danger of falling into the cliché, shoddiness and superficiality which cross out the chance of success. For Le Guin, as for Tolkien, genuine fantasy is thus extremely difficult to achieve but “when fantasy is the real thing, nothing, after all, is realer” (95). Jane Yolen, finally, in the expanded edition of *Tough Magic. Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood* (2000) calls myths, fairy-tales, fantasies, and folklore every human child’s “birthright, […] proper legacy, […] and a basic developmental need […] indispensable to the life of the mind” (14). Inasmuch as Yolen sees such stories as serving “four very basic functions in the education of Everychild” (15), she also asserts that the eponymous

*Tough Magic* stories are not always the popular ones. They ask the reader to bring as much to the tale as the writer. They force a confrontation with a harsher, deeper, truer reality. They ask heart—and give it in return. […] The fantasy book pushes the reader on to a confrontation with life’s greatest mysteries, the great unknowns that frighten us all […] Such books can provide a sense of good and evil, a moral reference point. (62-3)

The novelists’ opinions notwithstanding, critical commentaries about fantasy are more variegated, but since fantasy in the course of the last century or so has become an oceanic-breadth category, most critics speak tentatively and
only about certain works or, at best, sub-genres. Obviously, to claim that all contemporary fantasy moves towards moral and spiritual themes would be as naïve as to claim that none of contemporary fantasy does so. And just as there are authors whose writing evinces a strong penchant for moral philosophy, so there are critics drawn to these considerations. Gary Wolfe’s still highly relevant *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1986) reveals that it is possible to identify two broad schools of criticism of the genre. Critics such as Ann Swinfen, Diana Waggoner, Eric Rabkin, and Bruno Bettelheim, as well as author-critics such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, G. K. Chesterton, Jane Yolen, Madeleine L’Engle and Ursula Le Guin, follow the “transcendental” bend. In different ways these authors argue for fantasy as a kind of literary quest for or consideration of the ultimate meanings of human life, a way to look for transcendence as the foundation of the Self through and in creative imagination. Other critics, such as Jack Zipes, Robert Ellwood, Rosemary Jackson, C. N. Manlove, W. R. Irwin, Christine Brooke-Rose, Tzvetan Todorov, Stephen Prickett and Brian Attebury, consider fantasy mostly in the light of its social, political, rhetorical, cultural, psychological and structural implications. This elementary division in obvious ways simplifies a picture which is not that of two competing camps but that of a whole spectrum of individual approaches which in some aspects overlap with others and in some diverge from them. At the same time it is helpful in the present discussion of fantasy because it reflects certain attitudes, concerns and assumptions about a human being and the world, just as much as it points out to certain priorities discernible in these authors’ works and these critics’ assessment of the genre.

In the perspective of the members of the first “school” fantasy shares many elements with the ancient tradition of *sophia perennis* and is often seen as a modern embodiment of humanity’s spiritual desires, including the desire for transcendence, for grasping the moral order of the universe, and for living an ethically fulfilling life. Representative to this school of thought, Diana Waggoner in *The Hills of Faraway. A Guide to Fantasy* (1978) treats the genre as part of a broader class of literature she calls “speculative fiction” (9), and sees it as a literary speculation about the possibility of the supernatural as an objectively real, although “unprovable reality” (8). As she explains,

[a] world of fantasy is not the Primary World; its internal laws are different from ours, and so preparation and explanation are necessary. In such worlds the supernatural is not merely a possibility, but actual fact. A numinous power—an ultimate power, for good or evil—orders the world and impels the story, acting directly upon its characters and events. In the Primary World, the existence and activity of such powers are a matter of religious faith; in the fantasy’s Secondary World, their existence and activity are subject to material proof. (9-10)
For Waggoner ethical perspective not only works well in constructing any
taxonomies of fantasy as opposed to what she designates as realism or post-
realistic fabulation, but also helps her define and distinguish specific sub-genres
of fantasy such as mythopoeic, heroic, adventure and so on. She is positive that
fantasy well realized presents psychologically human characters who face moral
and ethical demands—usually placed on them by beings of the supernatural
order—and whose actions are eventually meant to show why moral choices
matter and how they constitute us existentially. A similar assessment of the
major driving force behind fantasy can be found in Ann Swinfen’s In Defense of
Fantasy. A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945
(1984). In it she avers that “fantasies published during the period [i.e. 1945-
1975] are frequently imbued with a profound moral purpose and […] display a
concern for contemporary problems and offer a critique of contemporary society” (2). Interestingly, Swinfen notes that the very term fantasy may be
associated with what Dante called “imaginativa or fantasia, the imaginative
faculty, which […is] divinely inspired [and offers] a dimension of creativity
going beyond man’s empirical experience” (3). Also one of the most recent
works on the subject, David Sandner’s Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader
(2004), explicitly associates fantasy with the human fascination with the
unknowable or the transcendent. Sandner sees fantasy as deriving from and
fulfilling three major impulses: 1) “an increasing disbelief in but continued
fascination with the supernatural;” 2) a reaction against and “a negative by-
product of arguments for the realistic novel;” but also, and as he stresses
“perhaps most importantly,” 3) “a vital component of the emergent discourse of
the sublime” (6). With this last point especially he asserts that the
“overreaching” characteristic of fantasy, as well as of the discourse of the
sublime, is no other than “a replacement or transfiguration of a waning primary
belief in the supernatural” (9), or, in simpler terms, an attempt to create a
consistent, albeit imaginary, literary account of the encounter with the other, the
superhuman, the transcendent. Thus, inasmuch as for Sandner “not all that is
sublime is fantastic, […] every fantastic image contains the possibility of
encountering the sublime” (9).

Assuming that the above outline of theorizing on the role of ethics in
fantasy—both as its ideological underpinnings and the affective goal—is
sufficient to support the claim about the existence of the genre’s spiritual and
moral dimension, one may still wonder whether it is tantamount to a movement
aimed at embodying human values. Here the problem is that human values are
quite difficult to define. Certainly, thinking in terms of human values
presupposes conceiving of a human being as a moral agent capable of
conscious, morally-binding choices and responsible for them rather than seeing
individuals as determined by heredity, environment, natural selection and other
external factors totally beyond their will or control. From this follows that human values will comprise qualities which are either desirable and expected to be evinced in the actions of a morally mature person or are taken to be congenital and “becoming” to morally sensitive human beings as opposed to amoral animals—values such as compassion, love, peace, truth, caring, wisdom, tolerance, self-control, and uncountable others, each of them equally difficult to pinpoint. At the same time, for authors, readers and critics who agree with Brian Thorne that with its increasingly frenzied, achievement-oriented activities “the human race […] is gradually moving towards corporate insanity” (43), the conception of human values is quite clear even without specific definitions. It conveys a whole set of assumptions opposed to modern culture’s unspoken conviction that the destiny of humanity is misery in life and oblivion in death. It is grounded in the belief that a human individual is essentially a spiritual being whose soul is so crucial that when it is eaten, dissected or lost—on account of dark forces represented, among others, by Spectres in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, and Dementors in *Harry Potter*—the human being ceases to be human. And above all it asserts “the primacy of loving and being loved” (49), of being open and ready “to face the wonder and mystery of being” (50), and to accept oneself “as a creature with immeasurable destiny” (51) over what Thorne sums up as

striving, competing, achieving, performing, outwitting, texting, ‘phoning, e-mailing, moving, shaking, driving up standards, rooting out dead wood, downsizing, conferencing, pre-empting the market, doubling profits, appraising, evaluating, improving efficiency, fast-tracking, monitoring—the list of frenetic activities and judgemental processes is endless. And it leads to a world which is not only fast becoming the undisputed empire of Mammon but also provides a field day for sloth. (50)

Speaking from the thirty years of clinical and counseling experience as a person-centered therapist who has seen thousands of burnt-out, depressed, disillusioned, lonely, “violent, self-denigrating, enraged, starved of validation, deprived of the sense of their own identity” (38) and ultimately profoundly unhappy people, Thorne sees this modern pervasive sloth as “forgetfulness [which] signifies the inability to be amazed, to wonder, to marvel or even to see” (50), and admits that “forgetfulness of who we are and whose we are, is fast becoming the collective neurosis of our contemporary culture” (51).

Given that perspective, it seems indisputable that literature which combats this neurosis, which nourishes the sense of wonder innate to humans while reminding its readers of what Yolen calls the need for “a confrontation with the deepest kind of reality” (47), and Thorne describes as “a search for what it means to be truly human” (84), will be essentially about human values. Far from
“moralism,” a view that “what is morally dubious is to some extent aesthetically bad” (Mothersill 76), such literature will not shy away from representing ethically or morally corrupted behaviors, but it will be clear about their consequences. As David Carr bluntly states of mythic narratives, “the characteristics of […] knaves and villains are offered primarily as a warning—usually reinforced by the inevitably bad ends of those given to knavery—of the dire human consequences of vice” (15). Last but not least, such literature will meet the criteria listed by Martha Nussbaum for works of moral philosophy—“[…] whose moral contribution […] is that they narrate the experiences of beings committed to value […]” (148-149)—and thus assist its readers in the development of their human capacities to see, feel, know and judge and thus to live more fully emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually.

The “Towards” and “Back to” Movements in Fantasy

In the light of what is said above, certain works or sub-genres of fantasy may be legitimately seen as embodying ethics and morality which spring from a more or less specifically defined conception of human values. Not only fantasy, but all of literature—as a multi-layered dialogue with history, culture, other books, authors, attitudes and so on—is thus a movement at once contingent on numerous factors such as genre convention, literary period, or socio-political situation but simultaneously incessantly creative in discovering new areas to be claimed for the human imaginative experience. This dialectics of movement in literature has been explored by numerous theorists for various genres, with Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism (1956) as perhaps the most comprehensive among them. In the case of fantasy this movement was discovered to be so fundamentally anti-modern in its outlook that the genre has frequently been called—specifically by Rosemary Jackson in her Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion (1981) and by Jack Zipes in Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion (1991)—“the literature of subversion.” What is meant by this designation is that the genre defines itself in sharp contrast to what has constituted, in the past century or so, mainstream Western cultural and intellectual assumptions and practices.

Historians such as Robert Conquest in his Reflections of a Ravaged Century (2001), literary critics such as Robert Alter in his The Pleasures of Reading In an Ideological Age (1996), philosophers such as René Guénon in his The Reign of Quality and the Signs of the Times (1945), anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz in his Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics (2001), psychologists such as Brian Thorne in his Infinitely Beloved. The Challenge of Divine Intimacy (2004), theologians such as Vigen Guroian in his Rallying the Really Human Things (2005), and specialists from most other