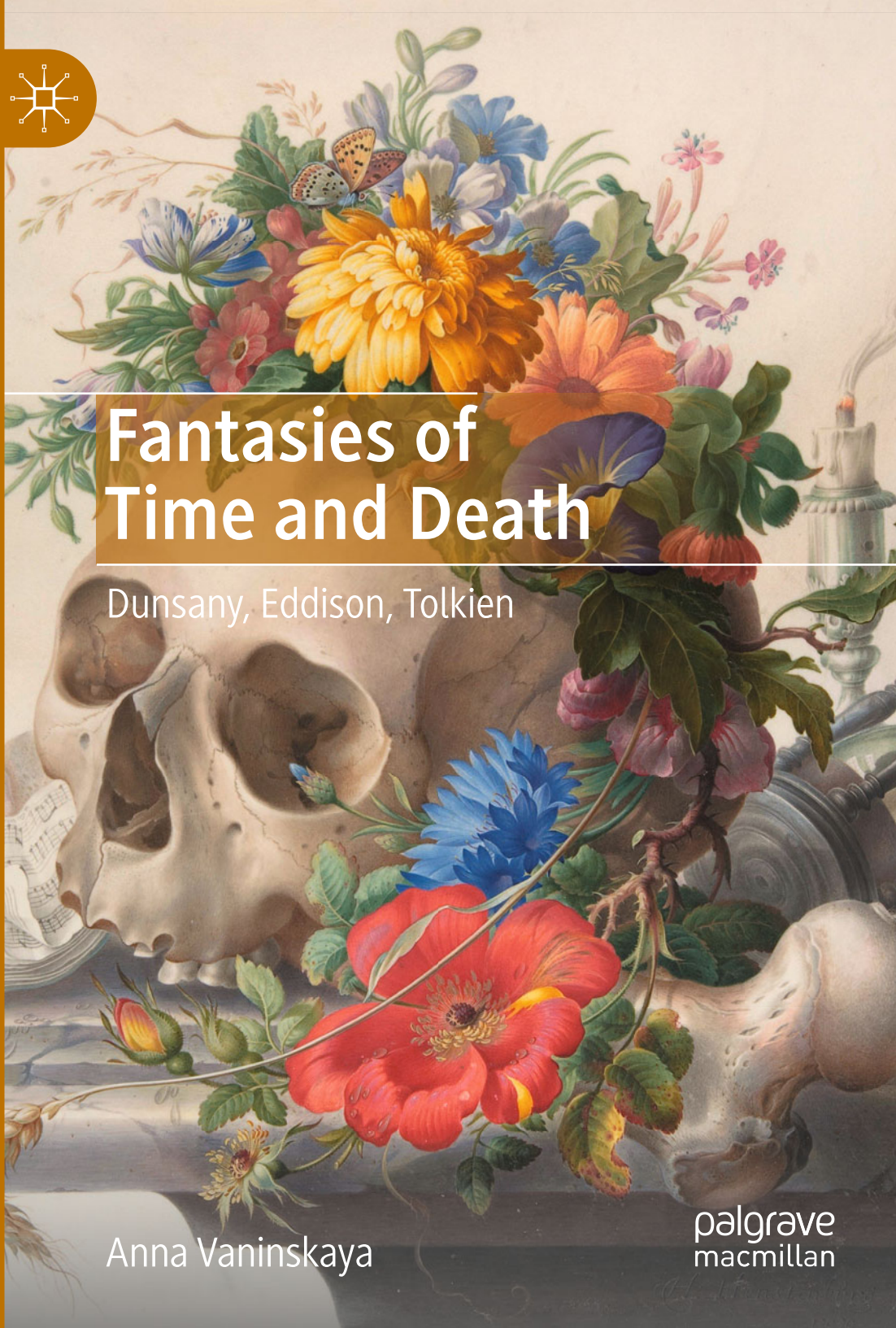

Fantasies of Time and Death

Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien

Anna Vaninskaya

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Fantasies of Time and Death

"Anna Vaninskaya's study of three major fantasists offers an important new perspective on the origins of the genre as a vehicle for philosophical speculation. By grouping J. R. R. Tolkien with his contemporaries Lord Dunsany and E. R. Eddison rather than with C. S. Lewis and the Inklings, she shows how these writers similarly use fantasy to explore time, death, love, and change."

—Prof. Brian Attebery, *Professor of English, Idaho State University, Editor*, Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, *Author of* Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth

"This important book makes a major contribution to our understanding of the impulse to create fantasy. Through a detailed study of three writers working in the first half of the twentieth century—Lord Dunsany, E. R. Eddison and J. R. R. Tolkien—Vaninskaya demonstrates how their invented worlds showcase their very different philosophies, providing them with an experimental testing ground as vibrant and complex as anything created by their modernist contemporaries. Ambitiously conceived, beautifully written and convincingly argued, her narrative helps explain as well as any book in recent memory why so many authors have turned to world creation as a means of expressing 'the nature of mortal existence' at a time of unprecedented global change."

—Dr. Robert Maslen, *Senior Lecturer, University of Glasgow, Convener of the MLitt in Fantasy*

"This is an important piece of scholarship that offers much-needed critical explorations of the works of Dunsany and Eddison alongside highly original readings of Tolkien's legendarium and manages to help the reader navigate very complex philosophical questions with lucidity. I can see this book being read and enjoyed by general readers too, which is quite an achievement."

—Dr. Dimitra Fimi, *University of Glasgow*, *Author of* Tolkien, Race and Cultural History *and* Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy

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Conventions and Abbreviations

Foreign words and phrases used in the text are italicised, except in direct quotations from a referenced source (unless the source itself uses italics). Where necessary, translations are provided either in the main text or in the Notes.

To designate multiple works by one author in parenthetical citations or Notes, I use either short-title forms or abbreviations, as follows (original publication dates):

Dunsany

BP *The Blessing of Pan* (1927)
CS *The Charwoman's Shadow* (1926)
CR *The Chronicles of Rodriguez* (1922)
FOT *Fifty-One Tales* (1915)
KED *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924)
PS *Patches of Sunlight* (1938)
TG *Time and the Gods* (2000 omnibus of six of Dunsany's early tale collections, *not* the 1906 publication of the same name)

Eddison

Z *Zimiamvia: A Trilogy* (1992 omnibus)

Tolkien

LT I	*The Book of Lost Tales, Part I* (1983)
LT II	*The Book of Lost Tales, Part II* (1984)
FR	*The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954)
LR	*The Lost Road and Other Writings* (1987)
MC	*The Monsters and the Critics* (1983)
MR	*Morgoth's Ring* (1993)
OFS	*On Fairy-stories* (1947)
PM	*The Peoples of Middle-earth* (1996)
RK	*The Return of the King* (1955)
SD	*Sauron Defeated* (1992)
S	*The Silmarillion* (1977)
TL	*Tree and Leaf* (1988 second edition)
UT	*Unfinished Tales* (1980)
WJ	*The War of the Jewels* (1994)

I follow the practice common in Tolkien studies of italicising all discrete works by Tolkien; but not by other authors. Because the spellings of Tolkien's invented proper names (e.g. Eärendil) have a complex history, I usually use the best-known 'final' version, except where I am explicitly referring to an earlier version from a particular text.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Game of Life and Death

Who'd stay to muse if Death could never wither?
Who dream a dream if Passion did not pass?
(Robinson, 'Tuberoses', 24)

1 Canon Creation

In the twenty-first century, fantasy is everywhere: on television, at the cinema, online and, of course, in paperback. But although literature has always been the home of the fantastic, the strange, the imaginary, the supernatural and the unreal, modern 'fantasy' is a very young shoot off this ancient tree of fancy. In the period with which this book is concerned—roughly the 1900s to the 1950s—it did not exist as a category in the British literary landscape, and the British authors under consideration here certainly did not know they were writing it.[1] The familiar classification of Lord Dunsany (1878–1957), E. R. Eddison (1882–1945) and J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) as 'fantasy' writers in a single British tradition is thus an entirely *ex post facto* one, and it was the American publisher Ballantine Books that first brought them together under the 'Adult Fantasy' rubric in the 1960s. The Ballantines launched their adult fantasy line in 1965 with best-selling paperback reprints of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), and from 1969 to 1974 the series assumed its ultimate shape under the editorship of Lin Carter. In its modern sense of 'a genre of literary compositions', therefore, fantasy was

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as much the creation of literary gatekeepers as of creative writers ('Fantasy | phantasy, n.'). We owe the linking of those three names from the 1960s onwards to the search for roots, for a pantheon of founding fathers (and to a lesser extent mothers) by the self-aware critics, editors and publishers of a newly coalescing 'commercial genre' (Stableford 449).[2]

That pantheon is extremely diverse (in literary, if not in any other terms). In addition to Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien, Ballantine also reprinted works by the following pre-1950 British authors: William Morris, George MacDonald, Hope Mirrlees, Mervyn Peake, David Lindsay, G. K. Chesterton, Ernest Bramah, William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne, H. Rider Haggard, Andrew Lang, George Meredith and William Beckford.[3] Ballantine's selection is the most extensive to date, but later series such as Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy Library (1973–1980) and Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks (launched in 2000) have expanded the list to include books by Rudyard Kipling, Bram Stoker, Edwin Lester Arnold, Henry Newbolt, Kenneth Morris and Leslie Barringer. Between them, the texts co-opted for these canon-making exercises represent nearly the entire spectrum of the fantastic: from horror/weird fiction and science fiction to alternative history, time-travel, retellings of or sequels to classical myths and medieval legends, philosophic thrillers and imperial adventures with elements of the supernatural, secondary-world fantasies and a few works that are simply unclassifiable. Some were bestsellers of their day, others entirely unknown. All were subsequently packaged together and sold as 'fantasy classics'. If the editors and publishers had dug through the back issues of Victorian and early twentieth-century popular magazines such as *Tit-Bits* and *Pearson's Magazine*, where the works of Haggard and Hyne reprinted by Ballantine first appeared, they could have unearthed many more stories with fantastic elements for their use. But even without such extra titles, the fantasy 'back-catalogue' created by these earnest or enterprising gatekeepers has proved enough of a generic ragbag to keep critics occupied all the days since in trying to classify and theorise its contents. If after 1950 fantasy could indeed be described as a 'fuzzy set'—in Brian Attebery's seminal definition—whose centre was Tolkien (*Strategies*, 12–13), before 1950 no centre existed, and this is clearly illustrated by the contents of the reprint series. The gatekeepers were involved in an anachronistic regrouping of such works in the light of subsequent generic and publishing developments. The last thing they were interested in was placing them back into their literary-historical context. But the three authors this study focuses

on—an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, a high-ranking civil servant in the Department of Overseas Trade, and an Oxford professor of Old English—did not spring fully formed *ex nihilo* to appear between the psychedelic covers of Ballantine Books. Each came from his own particular milieu, and much recent criticism has been dedicated to exploring their cultural roots and formal achievements in their own terms, on the understanding that their work deserves to be taken out of the straitjacket of the fantasy 'canon' retrospectively imposed upon it, and reinserted into the wider literary contexts in which the authors actually operated.[4]

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Dunsany was by far the most famous of the three: a transatlantically successful playwright, as well as short-story writer and novelist, and a friend of literary celebrities such as W. B. Yeats and Rudyard Kipling. Eddison was never popular, but his books were also read on both sides of the Atlantic, reviewed in the mainstream press, and published by Faber and Faber until the paper shortages of the Second World War made it increasingly difficult for him to find a British publisher (he had more luck with the Americans). Tolkien, as late as 1950, when Eddison was already dead and Dunsany's fame a thing of the past, remained comparatively unknown. He had already spent over thirty years producing many volumes' worth of drafts—in addition to his writing for children and academic audiences—but most of it had still to find its way into print. He had met Eddison and admired his work (all of which he claimed to have read) with qualifications; he had also read Dunsany (his own writing was once compared to Dunsany's by a perplexed publisher's reader).[5] But there is no real evidence of a relationship of influence or emulation in either case.[6] It is worth remembering that these writers never constituted a school amongst themselves; each was independent and *sui generis*, and each was destined for a very different kind of afterlife. The reversal of fortunes was particularly striking in Tolkien's case, who went on—thanks largely to the accidents of publishing history—to have a major impact on the subsequent development of the mass fantasy genre. Dunsany exerted a much narrower though still notable influence as what might be called a fantasist's fantasist[7]; while Eddison, admired by many, but rarely imitated, has had the fewest direct descendants.

The selection of these writers for comparative study might thus appear arbitrary, if it were not for the fact that there are two weighty reasons to bracket Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien together that have little to do with matters of canon creation. The first is related to the scope and

nature of their work; the second, to its shared thematic preoccupation. All three produced large, stylistically heterogeneous oeuvres; and all three devoted them to the exploration of mortality and temporality, in both their divine and human dimensions.

2 Scope, Nature and Theme

For all the significance it has assumed in post-Tolkien fantasy, 'world-building'—defined in *literary* terms as the proliferation, as an end in itself and in superfluity to the requirements of any given plot, of detail about an imagined (alternative, secondary, other) world—was not a shared pursuit among practitioners of early fantasy.[8] But Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien were all masters of world-building in the *literal* sense. They wrote about god(s) and the creation of reality, adopting allegorical or discursive styles, and drawing upon philosophical models, as well as key theological elements from Christian, Norse, Celtic or Greek mythoi. All three also wrote narratives that took the 'world' for granted and chronicled instead the adventures of individual heroes in it. Such texts, modelled on epics, quest romances, fairy-tales or *Kunstmärchen*, and at times inflected by the techniques of the realist novel, include their best-known publications: Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. But crucially, these texts are not standalone works: they are situated either within or in relation to the authors' broader cosmopoietic (literally 'world-creating') frameworks in a way that has no equivalent in the work of any other writer from the British fantasy 'back-catalogue'. David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) might rival Eddison's philosophical ambition, but cannot remotely match the sheer scale of Dunsany's, Eddison's and Tolkien's visions.[9]

Dunsany started out with cosmopoiesis in his earliest story collections and then shaded off into fairy-tale romance; Eddison's development followed a reverse trajectory. He only slowly groped his way from the heroics of *The Worm Ouroboros*, a straightforward fantasy adventure in imitation-Jacobean prose, to the philosophico-mythological complexity of the *Zimiamvia* trilogy—*Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), and the posthumously published and incomplete *The Mezentian Gate* (1958). These books rework the Homeric *Hymns* to Aphrodite and Spinoza's *Ethics* in the context of a Renaissance-inflected secondary

world, exploring, like Dunsany but much more systematically, the interrelations of time and eternity, the creation of worlds and the meaning of death and personal annihilation in the light of a new conception of Beauty as the governing value of existence. The trilogy is—sometimes by turns, sometimes simultaneously—a theological treatise, an action fantasy, a realist society melodrama set in the Edwardian and interwar periods, and a semi-modernist experiment characterised by vertiginous shifts of perspective, complicated play with narrative time and dense multilingual allusiveness.[10] Modernist devices aside, Tolkien's oeuvre matches this formal variety point for point, and then takes it further. To the autobiographical realism of Tolkien's unfinished time-travel novels, the exuberant archaism and narrative impulse of his early myth-making, and the ever more involved metaphysical speculations about the relationship between the body and soul, the incarnation, and the nature of evil in the imaginary universe, one can add Tolkien's large and stylistically diverse corpus of poetry, his maps, linguistic essays and etymological dictionaries of invented languages, not to mention translations into Old English of the historical annals of the Gods and Elves. Dunsany's work lacked Tolkien's world-building versatility, and the rigorous controlling vision of Eddison's later and more complex project, but just like them he operated freely in the cosmopoietic, romantic and realist modes, producing alternative theogonies alongside conventional romances and novels.

All three writers, in the words of Olaf Stapledon's preface to his science fiction novel *Last and First Men* (1930), aimed 'not merely to create aesthetically admirable fiction … nor mere fiction, but myth'—something that, as Stapledon implies in his preface (9), and as C. S. Lewis remarked of the Victorian fantasist George MacDonald, may not be understandable in terms of *literary* art at all.[11] Myth is, of course, a pre- or extra-literary category, and the same may be said of other purely theological components of cosmopoietic invention, but in the trio's work these serve as enablers of literary creativity all along the spectrum from lyrical poetry to prose pastiche. Consider 'When the Gods Slept' from Dunsany's second collection of creation myths, *Time and the Gods* (1906) (the first, *The Gods of Pegāna*, appeared in 1905):

> All the gods were sitting in Pegāna, and Their slave Time lay idle at Pegāna's gate with nothing to destroy, when They thought of worlds … Then (who knoweth when?), as the gods raised Their hands making the sign of the gods, the thoughts of the gods became worlds and silver moons.

> … Then upon earth the gods played out the game of the gods, the game of life and death … At last They mocked no more at life and laughed at death no more, and cried aloud in Pegāna: 'Will no new thing be? Must those four march for ever round the world till our eyes are wearied with the treading of the feet of the Seasons that will not cease, while Night and Day and Life and Death drearily rise and fall?' … It may be that the worlds shall pass and we would fain forget them.'
>
> Then the gods slept. (*TG*, 24–5)

The passage provides an illustration of literal cosmopoiesis that perfectly analogises the task of the cosmopoietic fantasist, whose purpose in writing is the creation of new worlds, a playing around with life, death and time in just the fashion embodied in the myths he creates, a taking on of god-like powers in order to justify the ways of god to man. Cosmogony and eschatology, how it all began and how it is all going to end, and the nature of mortal existence in the interim between creation and apocalypse—that is ultimately what the fantasy of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien is about.

The gods' game of life and death is probably the most 'universal' theme in existence; and no period or mode of literature has neglected to engage with their slave Time.[12] Indeed, time and death are not easily uncoupled, since their relationship is both antithetical and mutually constitutive. 'What is it all', asks the Victorian Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson after a fourteen-couplet-long panorama of human existence, 'if we all of us end but in being our own corpse-coffins at last'? ('Vastness' in Tennyson 551). Individual death here is a discrete event or terminus: the cessation of life in time. But it can also be a state: either the absence of life (life's obverse, nothingness) or a different kind of life (the afterlife) characterised by its timelessness, a part of God's eternal now, the timeless eternity of Augustine and Boethius. Time, on the other hand, has since Aristotle's day been associated with change, with successiveness or sequentiality, whether as a perception of the human mind or an actual characteristic of external reality. It is neither event nor state, but process: Virgil's *fugit inreparabile tempus*, whose flight in relation to human life always brings death in its wake, while remaining its opposite. Shakespeare's and Marvell's 'Devouring time' on his 'wingèd chariot', scythe in hand—as much as Tennyson's 'Time, a maniac scattering dust'[13]—are personifications of the movement that issues in stillness, the sequence that leads to a last term, the ceaseless changefulness that brings us inexorably to the final change, to the threshold of death-as-event, and propels us

into eternity or nothingness, into death-as-state. For the human individual and for all of humanity's works, the process not only contains its own end, but is defined by the end towards which it must inevitably tend, a kind of Heideggerian being-toward-death. Philosophers, theologians and poets have been contemplating this process for thousands of years. As Augustine says in *The City of God*, inspired by Seneca's famous *cotidie morimur* ['we die every day'][14]:

> no sooner do we begin to live in this dying body, than we begin to move ceaselessly toward death. For in the whole course of this life … its mutability tends toward death. … our whole life is nothing but a race toward death, in which no one is allowed to stand still for a little space, or to go somewhat more slowly, but all are driven forward with an impartial movement, and with equal rapidity. (377)

Life in time, in other words, is but the process of dying.

This is the second reason why Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien deserve to be bracketed together. The bodies of work they created, running into many thousands of pages, are characterised by an obsession with temporality, mortality and eternity, with process, event and state. In this, they are not alone. From among the inhabitants of the early fantasy canon, one can easily select others who were just as fascinated with these perennial themes. This is hardly a surprise, even when it comes to those authors who had no biographical reason to be drawn to the topic, related to personal bereavement, Christian belief, or experience of the carnage of two world wars, as was the case to varying degrees with Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien. All writers are human beings, and fantasy has from its very beginnings proved as useful a vehicle for the expression of human hopes and fears as any other genre.[15] But of these other fantasists, the majority did not choose to take the high road of cosmopoiesis, to engage with the divine that 'visits time and belongs to eternity' on equal terms with the human.[16] Instead, they settled for what in Northrop Frye's terms may be called romantic fantasy, in which the gods appear (if at all) only as offstage ciphers.[17] Their main template was the quest romance rather than the creation myth; their most typical product a cohesive narrative rather than a multi-generic universe. In romantic fantasy, the grand philosophical questions and the divine perspective entailed in cosmopoiesis yield to an elegiac preoccupation with the individual's personal experience of the

passage of time and the encounter with death. Such texts are not concerned with the eternity of god, but with the place and value of immortality in a mortal world—being 'allowed to stand still' or go slowly, in Augustine's words—with fairylands and fountains of youth, all of which a hero may strive for in this life.

The rest of this introduction will briefly place Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien back in the company of a fellow trio of fantasists from the Ballantine list—two Victorian precursors and a twentieth-century contemporary—who took the romantic road to arrive at a similar destination. If Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien were solely the authors of the three books they are best known for today, the following overview would serve to remind us of the deep affinity of method and purpose amongst key early practitioners of the genre—and to vindicate the construction of the genre in the first place as a unified field. As things stand, the overview will also serve to establish a reference range against which the three extended case studies that form the bulk of this book can be set, to show how much further and in what different directions fantasy writing could go in its pursuit of answers to the problem of time and death.

3 In Fantastic Company

The wanderer in search of lost time and an escape from death is a key figure of romantic fantasy, and so is his opposite, the seeker wishing to embrace death and come to terms with time. Often, the two figures turn out to be one and the same. Consider the progress of the young king's son Ralph, riding across a medieval romance landscape to find the well at the World's End, whose draught restores strength, prolongs life and assuages sorrow. At the very beginning of his quest, he is told: 'I hear say that [the water of the well] saveth from weariness and wounding and sickness; and it winneth love from all, and maybe life everlasting'.[18] But after hundreds of pages of adventures, on the very brink of the quest's fulfilment, the real nature of the well is revealed: 'it may not keep any man alive for ever; for so have the Gods given us the gift of death lest we weary of life'.[19] Death as the 'gift' of God to men, and the weariness of life attendant upon an endless existence are the cornerstone concepts of Tolkien's universe, but Ralph is not Tolkien's hero. He is the hero of the ur-romantic fantasy: William Morris's *The Well at the World's End*, published in 1896. Morris (1834–1896)—the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite

poet, arts and crafts designer, socialist campaigner and fervent medievalist—dedicated the last eight years of his life to the composition of a string of highly patterned romances of idealised love and war. These brought together stylised archaism, pseudo-medieval settings, supernatural beings and artefacts and quest narratives: elements that have now come to characterise fantasy *tout court* in the popular imagination. Read avidly by Tolkien about twenty years later, they (along with Morris's poetry) furnished a storehouse of tropes that lasted Tolkien until the middle of the twentieth century. Three of the seven main romances, *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings* (1889), *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891) and *The Well at the World's End*, dwelt with particular feeling on the subject of 'the Great Escape' from 'Death',[20] and the desire for or rejection of personal immortality in this world (Tolkien, *OFS*, 74).

Morris had been nursing this theme for a long time. *The Earthly Paradise* epic (1868–1870) that made his name as a poet (and that Tolkien carried with him on the Western Front) had already set out the parameters of the problem. In the poem's frame narrative, a group of wanderers sail away from medieval Norway to seek 'that desired gate / To immortality and blessed rest' that legends say may be found in the West (Morris 3: 13). But their quest for the Earthly Paradise 'where none grew old' turns into 'a tale of woe, / A tale of folly and of wasted life, / Hope against hope, the bitter dregs of strife, / Ending, where all things end, in death at last' (3: 6–7). They grow old and disillusioned in the search, frittering away their life in the attempt to prolong it. When Morris turned to this theme again in his prose romances of the late 1880s and 1890s, his protagonists had learned better. Another group of wanderers appears in *The Glittering Plain*, searching for the land of eternal youth, and—unlike the wanderers of the poem—they find it. Happy ending? On the contrary, the hero of the romance cannot wait to get away from the 'Land of Living Men' and strives with all his might to return to mortal life. The 'Great Escape' here leads towards death rather than away from it. The fantastic mode thus enables Morris to present the temptation of immortality as a real possibility: death ceases to be a necessity and becomes a choice. In *The Glittering Plain,* the earthly paradise receives a decidedly ambivalent portrayal, and the hero Hallblithe spurns its promise of eternal youth, peace and sexual pleasure in favour of a return to the family home and, eventually, the family grave.

All of Morris's romances, whether or not they are concerned with the temptation of immortality, centre around the same set of values: strong

kinship ties, struggle against oppression and, if necessary, honourable death for the individual to ensure the continuation of life for the community. The dilemma—whether to buy the life of one's extended family at the cost of one's own death or to choose life everlasting at their expense—is most evident in the predicament of Thiodolf, the Gothic tribal hero of *The House of the Wolfings*. He voluntarily chooses death in the cause of his Folk's survival when offered the chance of individual immortality. But even those characters who do not have to sacrifice themselves must still learn to live by the same rule: to place the needs of their fellows—those people who, whether related by blood or not, constitute their true home in this life—above individual aggrandisement. To those of Morris's heroes and heroines of superlative prowess and beauty who follow this rule, happiness in this life is granted and death itself becomes sweet: 'he fell asleep fair and softly, when this world had no more of deeds for him to do' (*The Wood Beyond the World* in Morris 17: 128). The water of the well at the World's End—Morris's reworking of the fountain of youth—grants Ralph not immortality, but enhanced power to protect his home. In this most utopian of the romances, real immortality is never even on the table, and no one mourns its absence overmuch. Ralph does drink the water of life, but life is not the same thing as immortality—it may be improved, but it cannot be indefinitely extended. The model of the good life that Ralph embodies is one in which death is accepted—when the time comes—as life's natural and fitting outcome. It is a model that Tolkien took to heart. In Tolkien's legendary history, the refusal of death brings about the downfall of a kingdom and divine intervention to change the fashion of the world. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum is the pitiful victim of a life extended beyond its proper scope; and the calm acceptance of death—neither desperately expedited, as with Denethor's suicide, nor cravenly delayed—underlines more than anything else the nobility of Aragorn. Almost as to Ralph, to Aragorn 'has been given not only a span thrice that of Men of Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at [his] will, and give back the gift' ('The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen' in *RK*, 425).

Learning to embrace the gift of death is also the central message of George MacDonald's fantastic oeuvre. 'Death', as Tolkien wrote in *On Fairy-stories*, 'is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald' (75).[21] MacDonald (1824–1905) was Morris's contemporary and opposite in most respects. A former Congregationalist minister where Morris was an unbeliever; a student of German Romanticism where Morris was a medievalist to the marrow of his bones; and a religious writer whose

fairy tales (such as *The Golden Key* [1867]) and children's novels (such as *At the Back of the North Wind* [1871]) often allegorised the journey of life into death, MacDonald produced quest fantasies that in their mysticism, symbolism, and theological heterodoxy were as unlike Morris's as could be conceived. *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895)—the two adult romances that book-ended MacDonald's literary career—send their protagonists on journeys not just to 'Fairy Land' or the 'Region of the Seven Dimensions', but to the afterlife. For Morris, death is the terminus: all longings for its transcendence on the part of mortal beings are natural but ultimately misguided; nothing more exists beyond the desires, hopes and fears of this life. For MacDonald, death is the beginning, and the other world more real than this one. He insists on the absolute necessity of death for the proper fulfilment not only of a character's own individual identity but of his being in God as well. Fantasy is what allows MacDonald to give concrete imaginative form to his notion of the soul's progress to this realisation. It is not just the confused mortal protagonist of *Lilith*, but the eponymous immortal demon herself who must reject 'death-in-life' in favour of 'life-in-death'. Both must go to sleep in order to awaken in a higher reality and be reconciled to God. Indeed, MacDonald's sleep of death bears as little resemblance to Morris's dreamless slumber after a good life's work, as the Biblically inspired phantasmagoria of *Lilith* does to the medieval patterning of Morris's romances.

MacDonald's first fantasy, just like his last, is best understood as a quest of the soul, pursued by a protagonist from the primary Victorian world across a fragmented semi-allegorical dreamscape. *Phantastes* ends with an awakening from death back in the 'real' world, and so does *Lilith*—and it is a distinctly bitter awakening. '[A] writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited, even a bodily and earthly life' (*Phantastes*, 268). Having died in Fairy Land, the hero of *Phantastes* is wrenched back into life, '[s]inking from such a state of ideal bliss, into the world of shadows which again closed around and infolded me'. The experience of returning to life on this earth 'seemed to correspond to what we think death is, before we die' (269). His only consolation is the realisation that 'I have come through the door of Dismay; and the way back from the world into which that has led me, is through my tomb' (272). The reversal of connotations is here complete: death is life, and life is death. Although the implications of *Phantastes*'s ending are undoubtedly Christian, it took MacDonald nearly forty years before

he resorted again to secondary-world fantasy in order to explicitly connect 'the realms of lofty Death' and the 'great good' they have in store with a Biblical kingdom of heaven (268, 272). The promise of paradise hovers over MacDonald's fantasy as much as Morris's, but it is a true Christian rather than a false earthly one: a destination that can only be reached by first dying into (after)life. The narrator of *Lilith* spends most of the narrative literally running away from the house of death. But the way to paradise in MacDonald is always through that house—through the tomb—as much in 1895 as in 1858. If Morris's protagonists learn to spurn the earthly paradise in order to embrace death, MacDonald offers death as the doorway to the heavenly city.

It would be too much to claim that after the turn of the twentieth century a shift occurred from death to time as the dominant focus of fantastic writing. But in the work of Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien and their contemporary Hope Mirrlees (1887–1978), time does emerge as a preoccupation of equal importance to death—a significance it simply did not hold for the two Victorians. If Morris and MacDonald were concerned with individual readiness (or lack thereof) for the act of passing over the threshold into that bourne from which no traveller returns—for death-as-event, in other words—Dunsany, in his early parables of Time, chose rather to reflect on the general human condition, to offer the kind of long view that the individual-focused romances of Morris and MacDonald could not compass by definition. The enormous timescales of Eddison and Tolkien here make their first appearance, and a personified Time nearly always conquers in Dunsany's stories, for no work of gods or men can withstand it. And even though Dunsany returned to the realm of fairy-tale and romance in *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, to Morris-style witches, king's sons, beautiful maidens and magic spells, something had changed irrevocably in the make-up of the form. Instead of a Morrisian celebration of the sturdy acceptance of natural death (sweetened by the knowledge of a continuing life for the community and the afterlife afforded by memory), and instead of MacDonald's reluctant but eventually joyful resignation to the life-in-death offered by God, we find in Dunsany an extended meditation on the glories and ravages of time-as-process and timelessness-as-state.

The particularly curious thing about *The King of Elfland's Daughter* is its ending. Alveric, the *Earthly Paradise*-like wanderer on a hopeless quest, returns defeated after many years from his search for Elfland—where his estranged wife (the titular daughter) has fled—just in time to see his home engulfed by it. He rejoins his wife, their son and most of

the other inhabitants of his village in what has now become a province of timeless Elfland—his youth regained, the dead come back again. A piece of mortal earth—of 'the fields we know', in Dunsany's beloved phrase—is taken out of history and out of time, never again to be 'known' by those (all of us) who are left to the cycle of the seasons, of births and deaths, and to the incessant process of creation and destruction so lyrically evoked in the romance's descriptions of time. Dunsany's Elfland is not the traditional kingdom of the dead. It is, if anything, a thought experiment: the physical manifestation of the state of a mind (its King's) not subject to the laws of duration. But the individual happy ending—the recovery of the past, the reunification with loved ones thought to be lost forever—is only made possible by the suspension of time, and therefore by the rejection of life in the only form with which human beings are familiar. Loss and ruin are postponed indefinitely, but this very postponement is tantamount to death.

In Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926), published two years after *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, Fairyland is, quite unambiguously, the land of the dead. Like Elfland, it borders upon the mortal lands; like Elfland, it is changeless; and like Elfland's, its border is permeable. *Lud* too concludes with an invasion of sorts, or rather, a welcoming opening of the gates to a visitation from the other side of the grave. But more important than this ending is the narrative journey of the protagonist, the depiction of which recalls the moral purposiveness of Morris and MacDonald, except that instead of coming to terms with death, Mirrlees's hero must come to terms with 'life-sickness', with the vertigo induced by change and the passage of time, by 'things happening' (50, 30).[22] Nathaniel Chanticleer wishes to escape not from death, but from life; he seeks comfort in silence and stillness and peace, in the 'motionless and soundless' view from a hilltop graveyard (31). This yearning for an Elfland-like stasis, for a break in the constant movement and restlessness of existence, for a refuge from the fear of loss, is only countered at last by 'the will to action'—a temporal moving forward, in other words, rather than a holding back (121). He must become the friend rather than the prey and fugitive of time. Though it offers a powerful meditation on the fear of change, *Lud-in-the-Mist* refuses to endorse existential despair and provides an effective antidote to the early Dunsanian view of Time as 'the Enemy of the Earth'. 'There's no bogey from over the hills that scares one like Time', says the wisest female character in the book, 'But when one's been used all one's life to seeing him naked … one learns that he is as quiet and peaceful as

an old ox dragging the plough' (Mirrlees 116). Nathaniel must learn to overcome his fear and nausea, to find his 'sea legs' and achieve a modicum of psychological stability and rootedness here, amidst the 'surges and swells', the 'ebbs and flows' of 'that great, ungovernable, ruthless element we call life' (50). But, in the great paradox of the novel, he finally learns to deal with life when he is proclaimed dead in the eye of the law and sets out from home to seek his son in Fairyland—the land of the dead. Only in death can life be renewed, only out of the dream-like suspension of time on the marches of Fairyland can a proper attitude to time in this world at last emerge. The ultimate lesson—if a book as symbolically dense (by turns beautiful and macabre) as *Lud-in-the-Mist* can be said to teach a lesson—is that the 'sweet' and the 'bitter', 'life and death', are both necessary, both 'proper nourishment for the souls of man' (237).

In its reworking of the idea of the triumph of death opening the possibility of a new life, Mirrlees's conclusion echoes MacDonald, though divested entirely of the Christian trappings of MacDonald's vision. In its focus on the repercussions of the desire to suspend the natural process of time, the novel fits well with Dunsany's and Eddison's nearly contemporaneous fantasies. In Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*, radically different as it is from Mirrlees's and Dunsany's tales of Elf- or Fairyland in nearly every other respect, the dead too return to life and time can be rewound if the gods so ordain. But it is Tolkien's work that truly subsumes within itself all the lines of development adumbrated by his predecessors: Morrisian longing for immortality, MacDonald's theological reimagining of the gift of death, Dunsany's attempt to preserve beauty from the ravages of time, Mirrlees's exquisite nostalgia for the losses incurred by living. What he brings to all this is a pervasive and piercing melancholy: the fate of Tolkien's world is to pass 'from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin' (*S*, 255), and all attempts to halt the process, to create eddies in the stream of time, are doomed to failure. Time-as-process in Tolkien is a winding down and a running out, but it is also a heaping up of the sands: the accumulation of the unbearable weight of time across his world's long and sad history.

All six fantasists were ultimately aiming for one thing: to capture humanity's attempts to come to terms with its transience, with the 'minutes hasten[ing] to their end'.[23] Facing death, fleeing it, or embracing it; desperately trying to freeze time, to rewind it, or yielding—joyfully, bitterly, apathetically—to its flow: all varieties of temporal experience may be found in the pages of their books. The refrain echoing down

the centuries of literature—*The Wanderer*'s *Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?*, Villon's *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!*—is amplified and infinitely modulated in their work.[24] But to the perennial *ubi sunt* question the early fantasists also propose a partial answer—a fantastic variation, to all intents and purposes, on one of the most familiar answers in the history of literature:

> But thy eternall Sommer shall not fade
> Nor loose possession of that faire thou ow'st;
> Nor shall Death brag thou wandr'st in his shade,
> When in eternall lines to time thou grow'st:
> So long as men can breath, or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.[25]

With this Shakespearean sonnet, sung by the immortal Queen Sophonisba, Eddison concludes his romance of resurrection and eternal return, *The Worm Ouroboros*. 'This', in the final clause of the sonnet, refers at the most literal level to the gods who have granted 'youth everlasting' to the protagonists and life renewed to their enemies (439). 'This' is also the book that gives life, again and again—every time it is opened at the first page—to the fantastic characters and their world. 'This', ultimately, is the fantastic art, the art of sub-creation in Tolkien's terms, which not only confers eternity on the passing moment, but gives life to new visions of reality and thereby 'assist[s] in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation' (*OFS*, 79).

But this power of art is predicated on our mortality. In Tolkien's allegory of the artist's journey from life to death, *Leaf by Niggle* (1945), the live Tree can only grow from Niggle's painted leaf after he himself has passed the threshold of death. Death and immortality are indissoluble not just for MacDonald, but—when immortality is understood in the Shakespearean rather than the Christian sense—for all the six authors. The flowers of fantastic art, like the 'flowers' of God the artist in Eddison's *Zimiamvia*, 'are immortal' (*Z*, 523); the same 'immortal flowers' that, according to *Lud-in-the-Mist*, 'spring from the thoughts of death' (Mirrlees 237). The flower—that ultimate symbol of *vanitas*, of the transient and the ephemeral—'shall not fade' if it is immortalised as a work of imagination, especially a work of fantasy; but it will only be so immortalised if 'the thoughts of death' spur us on. As the aestheticist poet A. Mary F. Robinson put it in her sonnet sequence 'Tuberoses' of 1888:

Everything dies that lives – everything dies;
How shall we keep the flower we lov'd so long?
O press to death the transient thing we prize,
Crush it, and shut the elixir in a song. …

Sweet Tuberose, adieu! you fade too fast!
Only a dream, only a thought, can last. (23)

III.

Who'd stay to muse if Death could never wither?
Who dream a dream if Passion did not pass?
But, once deceived, poor mortals hasten hither
To watch the world in Fancy's magic glass.

Truly your city, O men, hath no abiding!
Built on the sand it crumbles, as it must;
And as you build, above your praise and chiding,
The columns fall to crush you to the dust.

But fashion'd in the mirage of a dream,
Having nor life nor sense, a bubble of nought,
The enchanted City of the Things that Seem
Keeps till the end of time the eternal Thought. (24)[26]

Death and time's passing cause us to dream, and our dreams preserve that which death and time destroy. The 'tides of Time [may] sweep [all] away' in the 'fields we know', but between the covers of the imaginary-world fantasy, in enchanted Elfland—pressed like Robinson's tuberose between the pages of a book—time has no sway. It is a sentiment Tolkien evoked with particular pathos in *The Lord of the Rings*: 'Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among *elanor* and *niphredil* in fair Lothlórien' (Tolkien, *FR*, 474, 455). The 'flowing streams of Time' will carry us, like Frodo, on, when we have closed the book and passed again into the outer world; but what is on the page remains there forever, and will greet us or our descendants when the book is opened again 'as if [it] had been first conceived' just then (485, 455). Finding himself in 'the heart of Elvendom on earth',

Sam says: 'I feel as if I was *inside* a song' (457, 455; original italics). He is right, both literally and metaphorically. The Elves, masters of fantasy that they are,[27] have caught for a while 'the transient thing we prize'. The song is Lórien, and it is also *The Lord of the Rings*, but it may as well be Dunsany's timeless Elfland—'only told of in song' (*KED*, 14). In the words of another song from Morris's *The House of the Wolfings*: 'remembrance still abideth, and long after the days of my life / Shall I live in the tale' (Morris 14: 176).[28] That is the paradox at the heart of Shakespearean immortality. To live in the tale you must die in the world; for the flower to endure, it has to be pressed to death; Tolkien's 'multiple enrichment of creation' can only really take place after 'Man' has been 'redeemed' (*OFS*, 79). Just as there is no life without death in *Lilith* and *Lud-in-the-Mist*, so there is no fantastic art without 'the thoughts of death' that make it possible.

Notes

1. 'Fantasy' as a term was familiar in the comparatively small world of British pulp genre magazines (a magazine called *Fantasy* appeared briefly in 1938), but its differentiation from science fiction was at this stage minimal, and none of the authors considered here would have associated their writing with it. The situation was somewhat different in the United States, where pulp fiction magazines of the pre- and interwar period, such as *The Argosy* and *Weird Tales*, published the Edgar Rice Burroughs romances and Robert E. Howard 'sword and sorcery' tales that laid the foundations for the emergence of the mass genre in the middle of the century ('fantasy' entered into the titles of American popular fiction magazines such as *Unknown: Fantasy Fiction* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the 1940s). American pulps also reprinted supernatural material from British periodicals. In fact, Britain's established nineteenth-century generic traditions—the ghost story, fairy writing, occult and decadent fiction, the scientific romance—were all selectively but repeatedly plundered in the twentieth for redefinition as various kinds of 'fantasy'.
2. Publishers include Ballantine Books and its imprint Del Ray Books (part of Random House), Newcastle Publishing Company, and Gollancz (an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group). The list of editors, authors and critics in the last fifty years who have traced the line of descent in imaginary-world fantasy through Dunsany and Eddison to Tolkien is very long. A partial list of those—excluding theorists of the fantastic in general—who have given some attention to the formation of fantasy as a genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or have examined more

than one of the authors involved in that process (including but not limited to those authors reprinted in the canon-making series) would feature: Ursula Le Guin, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, Colin Manlove, Kath Filmer, Karen Michalson, Stephen Prickett, William R. Irwin, Rosemary Jackson, Brian Attebery, John Clute, Farah Mendlesohn, Edward James, Brian Stableford, Michael Saler, William N. Gray, Richard Mathews, Jason Marc Harris, Bruce Stewart, Gary K. Wolfe, Mark Wolf, Jamie Williamson, and Elizabeth M. Sanders.

3. Beckford is a Gothic chronological outlier, but the rest were all active from the Victorian period onwards.
4. Even a partial list of the Tolkien criticism that does this—including essays in numerous collections, companions and encyclopaedias, articles in journals dedicated to the Inklings and to Tolkien specifically, such as *Tolkien Studies*, monographs from publishers such as Walking Tree Publishers, McFarland, Kent State UP, Greenwood, Palgrave Macmillan and HarperCollins—would exceed the space available. There is a venerable tradition of source and context-study in Tolkien scholarship that covers not just the Middle Ages, but also classical antiquity, and Victorian, Edwardian and later twentieth-century literature and culture, including modernism. References to individual pieces of Tolkien criticism in this book are therefore highly selective and are not intended to be in any way comprehensive. Dunsany and Eddison have received substantially less attention, so it is possible to indicate some general highlights, not all of which, however, manage to go beyond the fantasy framework. On Dunsany see Joshi's *Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*, his edited collection *Critical Essays* and other publications; Touponce; Schweitzer's *Pathways to Elfland* and chapters on Dunsany and Eddison in *Discovering Classic Fantasy*; Rateliff's *Beyond the Fields We Know*; and back issues of *Studies in Weird Fiction* and *Mythlore* for quite a few articles approaching Dunsany from different angles, including postcolonial ones. No monographs have been dedicated to Eddison and unreflectingly dismissive criticism will remain uncited; however, illuminating work has appeared in doctoral and essay form, including Rolland; Flieger's 'The Man Who Loved Women'; Young's *Secondary Worlds*, which engages at length with Eddison's unpublished archival papers, and his articles: 'Aphrodite'; 'Artemis'; 'Salvation'; 'Foundations'; and various older articles on *The Worm Ouroboros* in *Extrapolation* and other journals. Geeraert's dissertation is notable for situating Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien not just in relation to both nineteenth-century and later twentieth-century fantasy, but also in their broader literary-cultural contexts (Tennyson, Yeats, Ruskin, Nietzsche, etc.). Such exceptions notwithstanding, most criticism still comes from within the field of fantasy scholarship, and enlightening work by critics outside the field is,

unfortunately, rather rare. Exceptions may be found in other 'niche' fields, such as Irish studies treatments of Dunsany, amongst the more relevant of which are Scott's doctoral dissertation and her subsequent published work on Dunsany in relation to the Celtic Revival, and Foster's Dunsany chapter in *Words Alone*.

5. For Tolkien's thoughts on Eddison, see *Letters* 84, 174, 258, 377; brief references to Dunsany can be found on 26, 375. For the publisher's reader's full comments in the infamous 1937 report on 'The Geste of Beren and Luthien', see McIlwaine 219. The reader also compared Tolkien's submission to Fiona Macleod's 1908 play *The Immortal Hour*, based on 'Gaelic' legend, about the relationship of mortals and 'the deathless folk' of the Celtic otherworld.
6. More of a case for 'influence' could be made in relation to some of the other authors in the Ballantine 'canon'. Tolkien did borrow from William Morris: the list of parallels ranging from narrative structure to poetic style is extensive and has been the subject of doctoral dissertations such as Massey's, as well as essays and chapters in various monographs. Eddison also read Morris and engaged with him directly in the apparatus to his translation of *Egil's Saga* (1930). Eddison was, like Morris and Tolkien, a connoisseur of Norse literature, and the author of his own Icelandic saga-inspired novel *Styrbiorn the Strong* (1926). On the connections between Eddison, Tolkien and Morris in this regard, see Wawn. Eddison's and Tolkien's writing has also been fruitfully compared to George MacDonald's: see Young's *Secondary Worlds* on the former and Eilmann's *Romanticist and Poet* on the latter, not to mention seminal works of fantasy criticism such as Manlove's and specialist journals including *North Wind* and *VII*.
7. H. P. Lovecraft was probably Dunsany's primary 'disciple' in the early twentieth century; Neil Gaiman is the best-known contemporary fantasist who has ploughed the Dunsany furrow in *Stardust* (1999); and quite a few fantasy and 'weird' fiction writers in between have signalled their admiration (Ursula Le Guin and Jorge Luis Borges deserve special mention). But Dunsany never shaped the popular form of the genre like Tolkien did.
8. There are many definitions of world-building in fantasy, and even more outside it. For a comprehensive introduction, see Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds*, and his edited collections *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds* and *Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, as well as Fimi and Honneger. For a completely different approach, see Doležel.
9. A case could be made for C. S. Lewis's fantastic-apologetic output, especially the Lindsay-inspired Space Trilogy (1938–1945) which combines cosmopoietic and romantic impulses, but Lewis was never part of the