

The cover features a painting of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white lace collar and a dark red dress, resting her head on her hand in a meditative pose. Above her, a cluster of stylized flowers with white and pink petals and green stems grows from a dark, rocky ground. The background is a mix of dark brown and blue sky with white clouds.

# H i n g e s

MEDITATIONS ON  
THE PORTALS OF  
THE IMAGINATION

*Grace Dane Mazur*

WHAT IS IT to be at the edge of the world of the imagination? How do writers, readers, and thinkers deal with this threshold? How do painters represent it? This unusual book—a combination of personal essay, literary criticism, art history, and memoir—examines what happens when we come under the spell of writing, when we get to that place where we enter into an altered state of consciousness, either as writer or as reader. Mazur uses the idea of hinges to explore what happens at real doorways as well as at metaphysical turning points and transformations—in fiction and poetry, and also in ordinary life.

As Mazur ranges from the ancient narratives of Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Parmenides, and Orpheus to the modern fictions of Katherine Mansfield and Eudora Welty, she presents the hero's exploration of the Other World as a metaphor for how we enter into the entrancement of the novel. Looking at art from the time of the prehistoric caves at Lascaux, through the Renaissance, and up to the Dutch Baroque, Mazur contemplates the structure of Hell, the usefulness of demons, and the paradox of writing and solitude.

Along the way, she ponders such questions as: Why are the gates of Hell so noisy? Why is falling in love like a trapdoor? Why is the rotation of the earth uncanny? Why do spiders provoke phobias? What happens when looking is forbidden? What is it about twilight that makes gods behave strangely and brings a brief melancholy to both humans and apes? Mazur shows us new ways of thinking about mind, writing, and existence.



# MAZUR Hines

MARK  
DELLERS



Hinges



# Hinges

Meditations on the Portals of the Imagination

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Grace Dane Mazur



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For Barry, Zeke, and Sasha



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*Tum demum horrisono stridentes cardine sacrae  
panduntur portae.*

The awaited  
Time has come, hell gates will shudder wide  
On shrieking hinges.

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*



# Entrance

One of the great mysteries is the altered state that writing brings us to: the way we cross over—when we read or write—from the “real” world that normally surrounds and claims us, into the imagined world of fiction or poetry. Strange and marvelous things happen when we are captured and captivated in this way. The mind’s eye becomes more powerful than the body’s eye; time changes color; language undergoes a shift so that we seem to speak a different native tongue.

For a long time, I have been obsessed with boundaries and margins, thresholds, and doors—both figurative and literal. I love the way doors open to a new room, a new thought, and how it is their hinges that allow us to swing them with ease or trepidation. In certain cultures one does not step on the door sill, as spirits reside there.

This book is not a scholarly discourse but rather a series of meditations on different facets of the entrances and entrancements of writing. In examining the threshold between real and imagined worlds, I consider how our own passage to the world of the imagination echoes the voyage of the hero crossing to the Other World, or descending to the Land of the Dead. How necessary such crossings are and how odd the portals, with their glorious hardware.

To think about these transitions can also be, in my view, to enact the transformation itself. Thus at times I explore at greater length a text (such as Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” or Eudora Welty’s “Music from Spain”); a visual image (such as *Orpheus and Eurydice* by Peter Paul Rubens); a concept (such as Forbidden Looking); or even, in the case of the hinge, actual hardware. These analyses take on a life of their own.

In Chapter I, I start by discussing the hardware of the threshold—physical and metaphysical—hinges, axles, and trapdoors. Why do important hinges have to make hideous and unearthly noises?

In Chapter II, after considering the shakiness at the threshold of fictional narratives, we proceed to the Other World and the Land of the Dead to look at those who explore there, why they go, and what they find. I tell of my own descent in the caves at Lascaux as

a preface to stories of archaic heroes—Gilgamesh, Parmenides, and Odysseus—as well as the modern heroine of Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party,” all of whom cross to that Other World and triumphantly return.

In Chapter III, we look at the case of Orpheus, a less triumphant visitor to the Land of the Dead, and we consider the nature of looking and seeing, why looking is sometimes forbidden, and why the gaze is so important that it can be fatal.

In Chapter IV, we return to Hell, and one of its most successful heroes, Christ, who goes there to release the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament. We go more deeply into questions of the hinges of Hell, as well as hinges of the body, mind, and heart. The hinges of the day present themselves, along with the peculiar moods that befall apes and humans at dusk, and gods at the twilight of creation. Then we look at the nested trapdoors and oscillations in Eudora Welty’s brilliant story “Music from Spain.”

In Chapter V, we look at hinges of the mind and of the heart in hopes of seeing how these rotating and pivoting instruments cast light on form and content in fiction and poetry, and on the creative process itself.

The texts and images included here range over a span of seventeen thousand years, so I have included a rough time-line at the end of the book for chronological convenience.

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# I | The Hinges of Hell

## Introduction to the Hinge

Picture the innocent honeymoon couple of the horror movie as they sit in their car that has just died, leaving them marooned in the storm on the deserted country road. Finally, they run through the flailing rain to the mansion on the hill; they ring the doorbell and the doors open, slowly, with an ominous rising shriek. We know these doors will shriek. There is no other way.

But why, in fact, are the doors so loud?

Actually, I am wrong. The doors do not sound; it is the hinges that sing out in the night. Metal against metal, metal against stone. Milton knows this: in *Paradise Lost*, he tells how Sin, the daughter and mistress of Satan, agrees to open the gates of hell:

. . . then in the key-hole turns  
Th'intricate wards, and every bolt and bar  
Of massy iron or solid rock with ease  
Unfastens; on a *sudden*, open fly  
With impetuous recoil and jarring sound  
Th'infernal doors, and on their hinges grate  
Harsh thunder, that the lowest bottom shook  
Of Erebus . . .

[BOOK II, LINES 871–883]

Here, Milton's syntax feels as marvelously grating as the sound he is describing. But the fact that something strange was going on with these particular hinges—the hinges of the gates of Hell—was also known to the artists of the Renaissance and the Byzantine world.

There is a quiet fresco by Fra Angelico in the museum of San Marco in Florence. Christ, in his radiant halo, floats just above the ground inside the doorway to the cavern of Hell, reaching toward a group of haloed figures in immaculate robes. This is *Christ Harrowing Hell*, also called *Christ in Limbo* (Figure 1).