Faith Seeking Fantasy: Tolkien on Fairy-Stories

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Abstract: This article responds to the topical interest in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, now appearing in Peter Jackson's film trilogy. It presents and comments on Tolkien's "theology" of fairy-stories as it is to be found in a reflective essay he produced in the course of his writing the work concerned. After examining the various features of artistic fantasy, we reflect on the theological meaning of art, its relationship to the Gospel story, and its place in theological method and cultural communication.

J. K. ROWLING'S *The Adventures of Harry Potter* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are now making their way from the books into films. Given the extraordinary influence of these rich products of literary imagination, any theology concerned to relate the Gospel to popular culture might well consider the significance of this phenomenon. At the same time, a deeper appreciation of the role of imagination in this kind of literature will well serve both theology and biblical hermeneutics. True, theology in the age of the great demythologisers is nervous about going too far in this direction, lest it appear to be losing its critical edge. There are plenty of cultured despisers of religion or new-age spiritual guides who would readily reduce the incarnation to one more instance of the gods visiting the earth, while the death and resurrection of Christ is listed alongside any number of nature myths dealing with the cycle of the seasons. "Faith seeking understanding", yes; faith seeking its ethical priorities in the culture of the day – by all means; but "faith seeking its proper form of fantasy"? A hesitation, perhaps.

Wary of the mythological imagination, theology opts for "objective reality", established according to the criteria of critical historical judgement, and aligned to modern scientific method, thus transcending the exuberant creativities of the fantasy. On the other hand, the yield of objectively established fact may be very thin gruel when it comes to feeding that imagination starved for centuries of its imaginative symbolic and narrative forms. Indeed, given the stark alternative between

theoretically established objective truth characteristic of the Enlightenment on the one hand, and the exuberant allegorising evident in the patristic and medieval church, to say nothing of the art of the Renaissance, one wonders whether rationality could ever exist in a pure form as far as Christian faith is concerned. Is there a sense in which the incarnation, for instance, is the redemption of the mythological imagination, with its expression of desire and hope? Is there a sense in which the resurrection of the Crucified is the reality which redeems and transforms the most inspired "fantasies" (in a sense to be explained) of the human heart, seeking life beyond the realm of death and defeat of all that is best?

1. TOLKIEN'S ANSWER

Pondering on the way such questions might be answered, I here present one approach which, however condensed and untechnical in its expression, might throw some light on the multi-dimensional discourse of faith, and the creativity called for if the Gospel is to be communicated with the tang of reality and in the full radiance of its truth. In this note I propose to leave the doings of Master Potter to more expert analysis and concentrate on Tolkien (1892-1973), though some comparison would ideally be in order. There is an advantage in this option: Tolkien, in the midst of his vast literary and scholarly productions, has left an intriguing essay, entitled simply "On Fairy Stories".[1] It is written with his typical erudition and lightness of touch, though not without critical acuity when required. Significantly, it is quite evidently a theological statement, with a specifically Christian focus. Moreover it was written at the very time he was bringing *The Lord of the Rings* to completion at the outbreak of the Second World War, and gives an indication of how his understanding of what he was doing progressed from the time he wrote *The Hobbit* to the years when his story-telling art blossomed to its maturity and highest spiritual seriousness.[2] I propose, therefore, to present the tenor of his argument with fairly generous citation from the essay concerned, and gloss it with my own remarks; and then present a brief conclusion on the role of fantasy and imagination in the life of faith.

2. THE REALM OF *FAËRIE*

Tolkien, the Rawlinson Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, begins by addressing what turns out to be a surprisingly complex question: What is a fairy-story? There is little to be gained by working with

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin, 1964) 11-70. This was originally the Andrew Lang Lecture of 1938, given at the University of St Andrews.
2. See Randel Helms, *Tolkien's World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) 9-27.

solemn dictionary definitions referring to the supposed size or magical powers of fairies, the incredibility of their accomplishments – or to the historical unreality or falsehood of what is narrated. In Tolkien's maturer view, these stories are not primarily about the variety of fairies or elves and so on, but about *Faërie* – "the realm or state in which fairies have their being" (15).[3] It is a realm of enchantment including and, in its way, transmuting our sense of reality. Such a realm

> … contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.[4]

Paradoxically, fairy-stories about fairies are comparatively rare. They tend to tell about human adventures into "the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches".[5] Hence definition depends not first of all on the dramatis personae, but on the nature of *Faërie*: "the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country". Even though it can be perceived by the imagination, it is indefinable in direct terms. Given the indefinable character of such narratives, Tolkien understandably limits himself to the following working definition: "a "fairy-story is one which touches on or uses *Faërie*, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy". He considers that many specialist collectors of "fairy-stories" have often missed their real point. For they deal with a special realm of enchantment:

> the magic of *Faërie* is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is…to hold communion with other living things.[6]

This is his first valuable point: this realm of imaginative artistry both registers and in some fashion satisfies "certain primordial desires". He gives two examples, namely, to survey "the depths of space and time", and to be "in communion with other living things". We might speak today of a "holistic" sense of universal history; and, allied to this, of the human relationship with all life, and of the inter-relationship existing between all its forms. Note here the efforts of imaginative writers such as Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry who attempt to deck out their version of a scientific account of the emergence of the cosmos in a quasi-

3. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 15.
4. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 16.
5. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 16.
6. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 18.

mythological narrative guise.[7] Though the result, with its overlay of allegorical didacticism and clumsy literary form, may not be entirely satisfactory, it does suggest that something is missing from a purely rational scientific approach to the universe – namely an imaginative sense of the whole and all the interrelationships it comprises.

Tolkien would claim that, rightly understood, the fairy-story should be presented as "true", even if such a claim awaits further explanation. Are there more paths to the truth than that of rationally patterned judgements? In a telling recent article, Peter Phan addresses the question of other kinds of knowing in the age of postmodernity.[8] He accepts that there is a certain postmodern impasse when it comes to both *mythos* and *logos*, but nonetheless suggests a way forward by re-activating the millennial tradition of "foolish wisdom" which is characterised by irony, fantasy and the knowledge that only love can give. Phan makes his case by appealing not only to various biblical and religious traditions, and makes helpful connections with the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly.* Whatever the case, a genuine fairy-story will break out of any frame placed upon it. Admittedly, the various components and imaginative dress of the story in regard to actor and incident are artistically conceived, and thus are the product of the imagination. For Tolkien, however, the story itself is not a distortion of reality but a wonderful way of entering more fully into what was routinely regarded as "the real world" before being creatively re-imagined in the arts of fantasy.

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE FAIRY-STORY

Tolkien addresses the question of the origin of such stories. In so doing, he touches on deep philosophical and anthropological issues. Investigating the origin of fairy-stories would lead to a consideration of the origin of language and mind itself.[9] Contrary to Max Müller's judgement that mythology is "a disease of language", he is inclined to the view that language is more likely to be the outcome of mythology, in an anthropological context in which mind, imagination and language are inseparable: "the incarnate mind, the tongue and the tale are in our world coeval".[10] He thus distinguishes in order to unite, suggesting a more integrated sense of the manner in which mind, speech and narrative expression are inter-related. Implicit in his suggestion at this point is that, while human consciousness is capable of endless differ-

7. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story. From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

8. Peter Phan, "The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity", *Theological Studies* 62/4 (December 2001), 730-52.

9. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 21-22.

10. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 25.

entiations, there is an originating incarnate compactness of existence in which intelligence, speech, imagination, art and feeling coinhere.

Nonetheless, given the variety of fairy-stories, he warns against interpreting them merely as different variations of certain common themes. Many elements and motifs of stories can be classified and studied, as in the case of folklorists or anthropologists intent on quarrying evidence for their own concerns. But such studies can miss a decisive point, namely, the distinctive integrity of each story – "a thing told in its entirety", as he terms it. The neglect of this feature results in "strange judgements".[11] He gives some instances of rough and ready comparisons – for example, considering that *The Black Bull of Norroway* is the same as the *Beauty and the Beast*, or *Eros and Psyche* of Greek mythology. True literary difference is found, not in a general plot, but in the unclassifiable detail which gives the particular story its peculiar atmosphere and mood. In the words of Dasent, an authority on Norse mythology: "We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled".[12] The soup is the particular story as it is served up to us by the narrator. The bones are sources or material if they can be discovered. Still, the soup must not be confused with the bones, nor the story with its ingredients, even if the distinctive tastes of soups of different kinds can be criticised. Biblical scholars will be immediately alert to the validity of this point, by recalling the variety of biblical creation stories, or, for that matter, the different literary unities that characterise the four Gospels.

Refining further the notion of origins of fairy-stories, Tolkien now introduces an important notion in their genesis: what he terms "sub-creation". It first appears in a passage suggesting the magical power of language:

> When we take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such "fantasy" as it is called, a new form is made; *Faërie* begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.[13]

Though the enchanting power of literature, and, more particularly, the fairy-story as it is here understood, the human mind displays itself

11. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 22.
12. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 23.
13. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 25.

as a "sub-creator", a dependent creator within the larger scope of Creation. This is not to say that all human creations are beautiful or wholesome, given their origin in fallen human beings. Still, Tolkien considers that this aspect of sub-creation goes beyond a quasi-theoretical interpretation of symbols of beauties and terrors of the world. He is against any facile understanding of such symbols as originally deriving from "nature myths", or as allegories of the elemental natural experiences of light, darkness, dawn, seasons and so forth. Such an explanation would be all too simple and inhuman, as though natural experience, myth, symbol are all eventually anthropomorphised and localised in epics, legends, sagas, folk-tales, fairy stories – finally to become nursery tales! This view demeans both the mystery of creation – and "sub-creation". A narrowly critical mind, dismissive of the place of artful fantasy in the apprehension of the real, might find itself alienated from one of its most precious resources.

As to the higher significance of fairy-stories, and the degree to which they are entangled with some kind of religious experience, Tolkien takes for granted that there are different levels or realms of human meaning. He considers the possibility that the fairy-story works a kind of reintegration of "re-fusion" of what has been sundered in human consciousness. In this regard, he notes the three faces of fairy stories: "The Mystical toward the Supernatural; the Magical toward Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity toward Man".[14] It remains, however, that he views the magical as the essential face of *Faërie*, and that its connection with religious experience or moral responsibility is variable. Though I will suggest here that Tolkien had a theology *of* fairy-story realm, there is no theology *in* the stories he produced, nor any evidence of religious activity in their narrative unfolding. Does this kind of literature replace or diminish the possibility of religious faith? Anticipating a little, let me cite Helms' astute remark, "the poetry of mythic imagination will not, for Tolkien, *replace* religion so much as *make it possible*, putting imaginatively starved modern man back once again into the awed and reverent contact with the living universe".[15]

But let us return to the "soup" that Tolkien refers to in his consideration of the origin of fairy-stories. The cauldron of story has always been boiling. New ingredients of whatever kind are added. The interpretation of the reality of the "soup", however, will depend on what the reader or hearer consider possible in "real life".[16] If we hear, as in his example, that an archbishop slipped on a banana skin, the factuality of such an embarrassment is not ruled out because it has happened many times before. If, on the other hand, we read that an

14. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 28.
15. Helms, *Tolkien's World,* 24.
16. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 29.

angel had warned him of such an eventuality, problems would begin to arise for the modern critical mind. Historical figures are often broiled into a larger significance in the cauldron of story, as would be, say, in the legends of King Arthur. In which case, "history often resembles 'myth' because they are ultimately of the same stuff".[17] The myth would not have arisen if there had been no human agents experiencing love and death and danger. On the other hand, the real depth of the human experiences concerned is extended through its admixture with the myth and fantasy. This, of course, is a problem familiar to students of hagiography, and one that arises on occasion in biblical hermeneutics. However cryptically, Tolkien suggests a far more human resolution of such problems than that of simply dismissing the ostensibly legendary as untrue.

Along with the soup, there are the "the cooks", and what they are intending in their culinary art. Tolkien considers that their role is to make a selection of ingredients in order to produce the "spell". This is a richly significant word, meaning both the telling of story (as in *Gospel*) and a formula for exercising some mysterious power over others. The enchantment of such narratives endures into the present, no matter how ancient or gruesome – or many-faceted they appear to be. Their magic consists in inviting the reader into "Other Time" – time experienced in another dimension, even if only for a moment. Typically too, they lead us to the locked door of the "eternal temptation" confronting human beings, to be opened only at their peril.[18] The "other time" and "the eternal temptation" inherent in stories born of fantasy appear strangely related to the "Godspell" in its account of what took place *in diebus illis*. Tolkien will explicitly treat this point as we shall see.

4. THE VALUE OF FAIRY-STORIES – NOW

Thus, Tolkien moves on to address his third question: What are the values and functions of fairy-stories *now*? Those who have a romantic notion of childhood often link the artistry of fairy-stories to childhood. In fact, Tolkien insists, they are not essentially children's stories at all; the association is simply an accident of the domestic history of Western society. Thus the view that fairy-stories are designed to trade on the credulity of children in whom trust and a sense of wonder are still intact is something that Tolkien rigorously rejects. It would imply that such qualities are out of place in the "real world". The adult ability of distinguishing between fact and fiction is not incompatible with trust and wonder.[19]

17. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 31.
18. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 33.
19. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 36.

Furthermore, our author does not accept that a properly scientific sense of reality and the real intention of the artistic imagination are incompatible. The value of the fairy-story has to be sought at a deeper level. For the creator of such stories is one who

> …makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather, the art has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from the outside.[20]

A Coleridgean "Suspension of disbelief" is really an attitude belonging to the primary world. It is "a substitute from the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying, more or less willingly, to find what virtue we can in the work of an art which has for us failed".[21] Here he makes a parallel with cricket, which could be extended into sport generally. Disinterested watching is one thing; participating is another. Still, some obvious questions are left hanging. If the "secondary world" is that of artistic creation, is the "primary world" simply that of routine, pragmatic adult common sense? How are the "truths" of each world related? Does the truth of the primary world inevitable dismiss that of the secondary world as illusory? Is the truth of a secondary world designed to undermine the pragmatic, logical routines of "the real world" – or does it finally enrich the primary world with wonder?

Tolkien suggests a range of answers when he returns to the connection of children to fairy-stories. While some, like Lang, suppose that children ask, "Is it true?", Tolkien considers that the more common question is about the goodness or wickedness of the characters concerned. He proceeds to suggest that fairy-stories are not primarily concerned about what is possible in the primary world, but about what is desirable – that is, about the primordial desires animating human existence: "if [fairy-stories] awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded".[22] In his own experience, a real taste for fairy-stories was wakened as he began his studies in philology at Oxford, to find that taste "quickened to full life by war".[23] He was in fact a survivor of the battle of the Somme. Though he has no time for the sniggering over the heads of children, he does allow that "the heart of child" understood in terms of humility and innocence, is necessary for all high adventure, and journeying into kingdoms greater and

20. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 36.
21. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 37.
22. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 39.
23. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 40.

smaller than *Faërie*. But there is no essential disregard for critical intelligence.

In short, adults should read fairy-stories as a natural branch of literature. This means that they are neither playing at being children nor refusing to grow up. The leading value of the fairy-story is that of literary art. It is thus enabled to carry other values with a particular intensity. What would these other values be?

5. FANTASY

The first is fantasy. The human mind capable of forming mental images of things not actually present – the working of imagination. This is opposed to mere fancy – imagination working simply with the "the power of giving ideal creations the inner consistency of reality". The fairy-story is indeed a form of image-making, but of an artistic kind, inviting belief in the reality of its "sub-creation". The power to realise imagination he names as "fantasy".[24] It transcends the primary world through its artistic creativity, a higher and quite powerful form of art in general.

For this reason, works of fantasy are usually characterised by an "arresting strangeness" – disconcerting especially for those who dislike any meddling with their primary world. To such as these fantasy tends to be dismissed as dreaming or mental illness of some kind, or as least as delusion or hallucination, or mere fancy. It remains, however, that true fantasy is difficult to produce, given the difference between the primary and secondary worlds, and our general experience of the merely fanciful or the deliberately delusory. One must expect that this is more so in our age of the electronic entertainment industry, to which is harnessed the power of modern advertising and the professional image-making which is such a part of modern political persuasion.

Of special interest, given the appearance of *The Lord of the Rings* in Peter Jackson's film trilogy, is Tolkien's specific connection of artistic fantasy with the literary. Our master story-teller considers that the story is best left to words,[25] for in other arts, for example painting, the production of strange forms is too facile. Even stage-drama is not a vehicle of fantasy in the truest sense, and may even be hostile to it, reducing it at best to a pantomine – which demands no belief of any kind. He finds difficulty even with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for confusing two modes of art, by introducing the magic of the witches into the historical realism of the story. Drama already has its own magic: the visible and audible presentation of imaginary beings in a story. To introduce fantasy into an already achieved secondary world ends up

24. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 44.
25. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 45

with a kind of tertiary world – a world too much! Through drama the actors are not imagined but beheld. The sheer visibility of the production distracts from pure story-making, and constrains it to the limitations of stage production. There is no real place for inanimate or non-human creation – trees, for example. Yes, Tolkien does make a passing reference to "the cinematograph",[26] but says nothing further. The following words provoke reflection:

> However good in themselves, illustrations do little good to fairy-stories. The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a *visible* presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of *bread* or *wine* or *stone* or *tree*, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination. Should the story say "he ate bread", the dramatic producer or painter can only show "a piece of bread" according to his taste and fancy, but the hearer of the story will think of bread in general and picture it in some form of his own. If a story says "he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below", the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but especially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word.[27]

Has Tolkien privileged the word too much? Would he have considered that the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* would defeat its purpose? Whatever the answer to that question, the realm of *Faërie* or fantasy invites a more intimate involvement of the hearer: we are drawn into the secondary world of the "sub-creation" of art, taken into the dream that the artist is weaving. Though it is difficult to find the right terms for this complete imaginative involvement, "enchantment" perhaps strikes the right note. For it works through the production of "a secondary world into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose".[28]

Mere magic, on the other hand, is intent on exercising a power to change the primary world. A magical "domination of things and wills" contrasts to the enchantment of fantasy. In its purity, this imaginative realm "does not seek delusion, nor bewitchment and domination; it

26. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 67.
27. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 67.
28. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 48.

seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves".[29] It is a "spell", therefore, that is intent on releasing and confirming the desires and hopes of the human heart.

Fantasy in this sense is but one natural human activity among others. It neither compromises reason nor blunts the appetite for scientific verity. In fact, to Tolkien's mind, the clearer the reason, the better the fantasy. The taste for the real, the sense of reality however undifferentiated it may be, saves fantasy from degenerating into morbid delusion.[30] For "creative fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it".[31] In other words, if you can't distinguish between frogs and human beings, stories about frog-kings would never have arisen! Tolkien concedes that his chosen form of literary art can be misused. It has that in common with all forms of human action when a corrupted mind or imagination is bent on creating in its own likeness. Nonetheless, it remains that "Fantasy is our human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of our Maker."[32]

In these words Tolkien suggests a deep theology of art, and, of that particular form of his own artistry, the fairy-story. Fantasy is part of our human make-up.[33] Because we are created in the image of the Creator, we share, in our human mode, in the activity of creation. This point is made more strongly as we consider some other dimensions of fantasy under the three headings of recovery, escape and consolation.

6. THREE DIMENSIONS OF FANTASY

Recovery

The sheer antiquity of stories bred of fantasy, especially when subjected to scholarly analysis, might suggest that nothing new can be expected. It has all been told and done before, to be endlessly retrieved amidst the "countless foliage of the Tree of Tales with which the Forest of Days is carpeted".[34] For the artist, however, each planting is a new event, the formation of a new and unique pattern. Artists need not despair of drawing because all lines are either straight or curved; nor need they give up on painting, because there are only three primary colours. The artist is embarked on a hopeful, ongoing recovery. The

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29. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 49.
30. For further discussion, see Helms, *Tolkien's World*, 84-86.
31. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 50.
32. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 50.
33. See Phan, "Wisdom of Holy Fools", 748-9. And specifically on the topic of fantasy, Colin N. Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).
34. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 50.

originality of artistic retrieval and recuperation contrasts with lapses into grotesque distortion or over-elaboration born of despair over making anything new. The recovery envisaged in fantasy is more a return and renewal of health. As with every art, it refreshes human experience, helping us to make and see things in their originality. The creativity of the artist works to clean the windows of perception, lest the vision be blurred by interior drabness, triteness, familiarity and possessiveness. Thus, it restores the human spirit to a kind of Chestertonian humility in the face of wonder and strangeness of the universe.

All along, fantasy finds its material in the primary world, only to enable us to see those elements "otherwise": "it was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine".[35] And so it is that the artistic imagination loves "nature", but is not her slave.

Escape

The recovery made possible in and through fairy-stories is allied to the aspect of escape. The adjective, "escapist", is not appropriate in this context since it suggests an attempt to evade the responsibilities inherent in life. Tolkien is trying to clarify the fugitive power of fantasy in quite another sense. For it is freeing and beneficial to those who cling too tightly to the timid dimensions of "the world as it is", or who have been too long habituated to the disenchanted domain of "real life".[36] The fugitive power of fantasy is more akin to escaping from a prison – getting out and going home. Literature is, of course, more than talking about our jailers and prison walls. Combining a reference to Nazi Germany with a response to critics who would deplore the fugitive aspect of fantasy, Tolkien observes that the escape of the prisoner is not to be confused with the flight of a deserter, just as the acquiescence of the collaborator is not the same as the resistance of the patriot.

For its part, fantasy inspires an escape into dimensions of life that transcends the way things are – even if the *status quo* is marked with great technological achievement. Tolkien is definitely suspicious of a technologically-shaped world. Rather than contributing to the glorification of the "robot age" of improved means and deteriorating ends, the art of fantasy labours to inspire a new appreciation of nature taken as a whole in its original mystery. The fugitive impulse that marks true fantasy is fuelled by a protest against the ugliness of our works and the evil they have produced in truncating human desire and mutilating our imaginative capacities. More positively, fairy-stories

35. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 52.
36. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 53-9.

nourish the millennial desire to escape – from pain, poverty, sorrow, injustice and death – into a homeland hospitable to the human mind, heart and imagination – in order to be no longer "out of touch with the life of nature and of human nature as well".[37]

This healthy kind of escape is related to a vivid sense of a rupture in our existence, experienced as a severance from the rest of creation:

> a strange fate and guilt lies on us. Other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on the terms of an uneasy armistice.[38]

Tolkien goes on to suggest that the art of fantasy carries the desire for a fuller integrity and an eventual reconciliation in regard to all creation. The fairy-story is a foretaste of a life that does not consist in "endless serial living", but nourishes "the oldest and deepest desire: the Great Escape"[39] – from death itself.

Consolation

As the language of desire and fugitive hope, fairy-stories provide their special consolation to the human spirit, endlessly expressed in the motif of "the happy ending". In his treatment of this aspect, Tolkien finds it necessary to coin a special word: *eucatastrophe* – the "good catastrophe" occurring with a sudden and joyous turn at the most desperate juncture in the story. For him the eucatastrophic tale is the true form of the fairy-story; and the telling of a *eucatastrophe* is its highest function. It tells of "a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur".[40] It does not deny the evidence of *dyscatastrophe* – of sorrow and failure. Indeed, the experience of temptation, suffering and defeat – the occurrence of catastrophe in the usual sense – is necessary if there is to be the joy of deliverance. The story of the "good catastrophe" denies, in the face of whatever evidence, the finality of universal defeat. All that the human heart longs and hopes for is not, in the end, under the power of what is worst in our experience of the world. To this degree, the genuine fairy-story is a form of *evangelium*, a fleeting glimpse of joy beyond the walls of the world, striking the human heart with a poignancy as sharp as grief itself: "In a sudden 'turn' we come to piercing sense of joy, and the heart's desire…rends indeed the very web of the story, and lets a gleam come through".[41]

The peculiar quality of this fairy-tale joy is related to a deeper perception of truth and reality. No artist intends to communicate what

37. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 56.
38. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 58.
39. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 59,
40. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 60.
41. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 61.

is unreal or untrue. Artistic creativity intends to communicate a deeper participation in what is real, and to express a forgotten or repressed aspect of truth. Joy arises from a sudden glimpse of what underlies our being in the world. With its realist intent, all art, and the fairy-story in particular, is not concerned to offer illusory consolation in the midst of sorrow, but to answer the question of truth itself. While any art-form has limits inherent in own inner consistency as one form of "sub-creation", there is an excess implied. The fairy-story is a form of art uniquely expressive of *eucatastrophe:* "we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world".[42] In the peculiarity of its form of sub-creation, the story-teller's art brings to expression "one facet of a truth incalculably rich".[43]

7. THE GOSPEL STORY

The following words are especially significant, and evidently autobiographical, as Tolkien relates the kind of consciousness apparent in the fairy-story with a sense of the Gospel itself:

> I would venture to say that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospel contains a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy stories. They contain many marvels – peculiarly artistic, beautiful and moving: "mythical" in their perfect self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered history and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation.[44]

On the one hand, there is the traditionally Catholic principle of "grace building on and perfecting nature". On the other, nature has its "strangeness" or peculiarity. Human understanding moves from sense and imagination to what cannot be either sensed or imagined or even understood – save through an imagination and intelligence that has learned to respect what transcends both. More particularly, the truth of the Gospel is a story that embraces the essence of all fairy-stories. It registers the basic desires of the human heart present in all such stories, only to lead them to a fulfilment, reconciliation and recovery. The

42. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* , 62.
43. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* , 62.
44. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* , 62.

Gospel story is that of the final "great escape", as it breathes with the joy that defies the power of evil and death.

In the realm of God's kingdom as the Gospel depicts it, there are many elements similar to the miracles, marvels and sudden turns that make up the realm of *Faërie* – above all the vindication of the crucified Jesus in the glory of the resurrection – "the most complete conceivable eucatastrophe". But there is a difference as well: the art of the divine story-teller has entered history and been located in the primary world where the marvels of grace are least expected. Human nature, expressed in the desire and aspiration of the story-teller's art, is raised to the fulfilment that only God can give: it is the glory of God's creation that it includes all the forms of sub-creation as enabled by the creator and redeemer of all. Tolkien adds, however, a qualification: "the Art is here in the story itself rather than in the telling; for the Author of the story was not the evangelists".[45] Note, therefore, the radically theological understanding of the Gospel story that is here presumed.

In line with his faith-inspired reading of the Gospel, Tolkien gives a further specification of the reality of the "good catastrophe" characterising both the Gospel and fairy-stories:

> The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. The story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the "inner consistency of reality". There is no tale ever told which men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.[46]

If one is to interpret Tolkien correctly at this point, it is necessary to give a special weighting to the experience of joy. The sense of joyous fulfilment seems to be the basic criterion for that "inner consistency of reality" communicated by the Gospel. Tolkien is here rather cryptic, disposed, apparently, to leave the further articulation of his intuition to theologians and philosophers. Why is it that there is "no tale ever told which men would rather find as true"? Why is it that so many who are natively sceptical and familiar with a critical examination of history have been prepared to accept the Gospel story as true on its own merits? His reason, however briefly, is clearly stated: its art "has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art". I note here that he does not speak of the *primary world*. In Tolkien's vocabulary, that phase usually appears to mean the routine world of common sense and practical living. He writes of "primary *art*", and identifies it immediately with creation, with

45. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 62, n. 2.
46. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 62-3.

the activity of the divine artist. For Tolkien, at least, the Gospel instils a sense of reality utterly consonant with the desires of the human heart, and the artistic aspirations that have arisen from it. But it does this, not primarily as a telling, classic form of human art, but as an encounter with the divine imagination – the origin of primary art which is manifested in creation itself, and all the forms of "sub-creation" it enables and contains.

The implication is that the Word of the divine artist is made flesh in the stories of the world, the "sub-creations" of human artists. The purpose of the divine Artist is that the world might be drawn into the joy of the divine imagination itself, to find disclosed the ultimately real and primary world. The Gospel story enters history. Such an incarnation does not abrogate the mythical or allegorical significance it has in common with all the stories that have nourished the desires and imagination of the fugitive spirit of humankind. Moreover, it intensifies the joy that is the essential character of such stories. For, in and through the Gospel, art has been verified: "God is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused".[47]

At the conclusion of his reflection, Tolkien enunciates a principle that has animated his approach all along. In the Kingdom of God, the presence of the greatest does not depress the small: "Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'."[48] The coming of the kingdom of God, then, is not bad news for the artist. The grace of that ultimate realm brings an assurance that artistic creativity expressed in fantasy, for example, "may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation". Through human sub-creation, the God-intended plenitude of creation unfolds into a manifold enrichment.

And yet, there is a certain reserve, expressed in an analogical awareness of similarities and differences: "All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know."[49] There is no question of a univocal identification of divine art with the human. What the divine artist is bringing into being in the primary world of creation still exceeds anything the eye has seen or the ear heard, or the heart and imagination conceived. And yet there is an anticipation; and with it a joy made possible through the art of the fairy-story designed to give a unique, fugitive form to the truth of what is to come.

47. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 63.
48. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 63.
49. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 63.

8. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

While Tolkien was cooking his imaginative "soup" of fairy-stories into their final form, an eminent patristic scholar was at work, making similar points. I refer to Hugo Rahner in his *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*.[50] Even though the book was not published until the later 1950s, it took shape at the same time as Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings.* It is a collection of studies contributed to the Jungian circle that gathered for the Eranos symposia on the shores of Lago Maggiore at Ascona in Southern Switzerland during the dark years leading up to the Second World War. Both writers were inescapably conscious of the darkness that was descending on Europe as the third decade of the Twentieth Century was ending. Rahner's researches breathe the conviction that the great mythic objectifications of human consciousness were inseparable from what is best in human experience; and thus had a rightful place in the great humanist tradition, then under threat in the perils that had broken on the world. His erudite studies especially document the abiding concern of Christian theology to anchor itself firmly and creatively in the human imagination – to "Christen" that classical humanist imagination, by preserving it and opening it to a redemptive fulfilment. With that intention, Rahner considered how a number of the myths and symbols of classical antiquity came to be preserved and developed in Christian tradition. He treated, for example, of the notion of "mystery", and its solar and lunar symbolic forms. Likewise he reflected on the symbolism of healing plants and herbs such as the moly and the mandrake, and the special spiritual significance of the willow. His final study is of Odysseus at the mast, transmuted in Christian faith to be a prefiguration of the cross. He shows convincingly that Christian imagination owes much of its fertility to its ability to claim its classical mythical inheritance.

What Rahner and Tolkien have in common is a remarkable sensitivity to the place of the imaginative in human culture, and the necessity of imagination if a culture is to communicate its most humane sense of life. In this regard, I mention another area of possible research, the work of René Girard.[51] His examination of the myths and literature have led him to a new appreciation of the uniqueness of the Gospel as the God-intended healing of the violence that has marked human history and been expressed in a variety of mythic and literary forms.[52]

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50. Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963).

51. René Girard, "Are The Gospels Mythical?", *First Things* (April 1996) 27-31; James G. Williams (ed.), *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1996) esp. 9-19, 45-61, 118-41, 145-76.

52. The larger frame of reference would obviously take in more well-known sources such as the work of Jung on symbolic archetypes and the researches of Eliade on myth and religion. In literary tradition, William Blake especially figures in the background to this

Given this wider context, I would understand Tolkien's presentation of the enchanting art of the fairy-story as "Christening" the imagination in a certain way. Faith may seek understanding in the interests of an intellectual conversion. The same living faith must likewise seek its morally responsible world-forming praxis, if it is to be morally converted, and be the source of ongoing collaboration with all people of good will. But if this faith is to carry out its intellectual and moral responsibilities, it must be alive to the mystery of the Creator and the wonder of creation. It must undergo a kind of conversion in the imagination itself, as it seeks to enter into all the art-forms that characterise our human ability as "sub-creators". Arts, visual or dramatic, musical or literary, make up this larger scene. To that degree, an integrated theology must inspire and appreciate a faith seeking its appropriate artistic expression. One aspect of that concern is what I have dared to term, "faith seeking fantasy", faith seeking the experience of enchantment, escape, recovery and consolation as described above. In an exposure to this art – as to all arts – a theological faith can find that the windows of perception are cleansed, and that its vision, even though the *chiaroscuro* of revealed mystery remains, will not be "blurred by interior drabness, triteness, familiarity and possessiveness".[53] Faith will lose nothing of its realism if it is more attuned to wonder and the strangeness of the universe.

Lonergan's axiom, "genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity",[54] is instanced even in this context. The authentic self is realised through a self-transcendence, not only in intellectual, moral and religious dimensions, but also on the level of imagination and its related arts – in this case, fantasy. In other words, the horizon in which our conscious existence unfolds to its full height and depth is determined by a transformed subjectivity. Through different but related transformations, the way is opened to reach beyond appearances to truth and reality; beyond satisfactions to moral values; beyond the idols of our human projections to the adoration of limitless mystery – and beyond "drabness, triteness, familiarity and possessiveness" to wonder and enchantment. There is a core of consciousness expressed in imagination, symbol, affect and dramatic experience that can be ignored only so long. To ignore it too long would be at our theological peril, reducing ourselves to pure theory machines, out of touch with the larger stream of consciousness in which the best of our thinking and writing takes place. All this is to say that love for God with a whole heart, soul, mind

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kind of exploration, though I am not suggesting that Tolkien was aware of any dependence on him.

53. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 52.

54. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 265, 292.

and strength loses nothing if it also includes the powers of the imagination.

As a convenient summary and conclusion, I append Tolkien's verse-response to a correspondent who had dismissed myth and fairy-story as lies – "breathing a lie through silver":

> "Dear Sir," I said – "although now long estranged
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
> Dis-graced he may be, yet he is not de-throned,
> And keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
> Through whom is splintered from a single White
> To many hues, and endlessly combined
> In living shapes that move from mind to mind.
> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
> With elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
> Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
> And sowed the seeds of dragons – 'twas our right
> (used or misused). That right has not decayed:
> we still make by the law in which we're made."[55]

55. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 49.