The Theology of Fantasy in Lewis and Tolkien*

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The impulse of fantasy, especially as expressed in symbolic literature, is fundamental to the writings of both Lewis and Tolkien. In a letter C.S. Lewis confessed:

> *The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. It was he who made me first attempt (with little success) to be a poet. It was he who, in response to the poetry of others, made me a critic, and, in defence of that response, sometimes a critical controversialist. It was he who after my conversion led me to embody my religious belief in symbolical or mythopoeic forms, ranging from* Screwtape *to a kind of theological science-fiction. And it was, of course, he who has brought me, in the last few years, to write a series of Narnian stories for children; not asking what children want and then endeavouring to adapt myself (this was not needed) but because the fairy-tale was the genre best fitted for what I wanted to say.*[1]

Similarly, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote:

> *Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme*
> *of things not found within recorded time...*
> *They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,*
> *and yet they would not in despair retreat,*
> *but oft to victory have turned the lyre*
> *and kindled hearts with legendary fire,*
> *illuminating Now and dark Hath-been*
> *with light of suns as yet by no man seen.*[2]

Evangelicals today tend to see the Bible only in terms of propositional truth, as if the Bible first and foremost encouraged looking at reality in a theoretical, systematic way. It is undoubtedly (and thankfully) true that the Bible can generate a consistent theoretical model that has far-reaching consequences for all of human knowledge, in the sciences as well as the arts. Seen as a whole, however, the Bible encourages, in a very basic, straightforward and ordinary way, what might be called a symbolic perception of reality – looking at reality through the frame of narrative, story, image, and other symbolic elements. The Bible begins symbolically with seven-day creation and the events in the Garden of Eden and ends with the visions of the book of Revelation and the dénouement of the Holy City, within which is the Tree of Life introduced in Genesis. The hero of heroes of Scripture is the lamb which was slain from the creation of the world. In a

profound sense, such symbols are not merely poetic, but solidly real. The lamb which was slain, for instance, is linked in a myriad ways to actual events in documented history, such as the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord. Pre-eminently, such symbols are linked to events and facts, not in the first place to concepts, even though they provide subject-matter for thought (for example, the symbol of the lamb which was slain helps our thinking about the achievement of the cross). Their primary function is to bring us into contact with significant events in history, selected events in our space-time, events of historical importance.[3]

C.S. Lewis suggests that comparatively recently we have lost an ancient unity between the poetic and the prosaic, the symbolic and the literal. In this, he was deeply influenced by Owen Barfield.[4] In the Bible, for example, 'spirit' is equally 'spirit' and 'breath' and 'wind'. Again, the *logos* of John's Gospel is a profound unity integrating many meanings which we today have to separate out. The same would be true of the early portions of Genesis; the common dichotomy of facticity and poetry in reading these chapters is misleading. As we saturate ourselves in the Scriptures a healing of this division, a restoration of a basic human unity of consciousness, can begin to take place. We find this far harder than, for instance, a seventeenth-century English, German or Dutch reader of the Bible would have done. The Bible insists on looking at the natural and human worlds through its multifaceted appeal to our imaginations. It blatantly appeals to our human taste for a story, and to our delight in other unifying symbolic elements such as archetypes.

I see the imaginative work of Lewis and Tolkien as reinforcing such a biblical emphasis upon a symbolic perception of reality. Their symbolic worlds, even though fictional, are in some sense solidly real. For this reason they take us back to the ordinary world which is an inevitable part of our human living and experience, deepening both the wonders and the terrors of our world. Our awareness of the meaning of God's creation and his intentions for us is enlarged. Tolkien and Lewis guide us in seeing this world with a thoroughly Christian understanding. They also illuminate what is revealed of God in the natural order. I shall try to draw attention to this emphasis in my article. Though fantasy was their preferred medium, this is not to say that it is the only valid symbolic mode for winning truth. The Bible employs numerous modes: historical, poetic, apocalyptic, story, motif, archetype, master image, prophecy, as well as fantasy. In the natural sciences, imaginative models play an important part in winning truth, both at the macro and the micro level.

Perhaps the dominance of realistic literature has coincided with the reign of modernism – the pattern of the Enlightenment – which squeezed fantasy onto the periphery of the canon of literature. Now that we are in a post-modernist culture, the

character and social role of fantasy might change and become more central, as it was before the Enlightenment became dominant. The continued popularity and thus cultural relevance of the fantasy fiction of Lewis and Tolkien – both avowedly anti-modernist – is surely significant. They might be called pre-modernist rather than post-modernist authors who have outstanding contemporary appeal, an appeal that continues to grow.

The imagination (imaginative fantasy)

The imagination is a mental faculty. Fantasy is a power and product of the imagination, as thought is a power and product of the intellect. As thought is the reason in action, so fantasy is the imagination at work. Both imagination and fantasy are difficult to define. Colin Manlove's definition of Christian fantasy is a good working one: 'By "Christian fantasy" is meant "a fiction dealing with the Christian supernatural, often in an imaginary world."'[5] In the case of both Lewis and Tolkien, their view of nature implied the reality of the supernatural world and its myriad connections with the natural world. Hence their Christian fantasy not only concerns the supernatural, but illuminates the natural world, and brings us into contact with it.

As well as being a power and product of the imagination, fantasy is also, of course, a dimension of a number of literary and oral genres, such as science-fiction, heroic romance (such as *The Lord of the Rings*), allegory, apocalyptic (such as the biblical book of Revelation), and fairy story. Tolkien saw the highpoint of fantasy as sub-creation, and Lewis viewed it as imaginative invention. Tolkien had sub-creation as his defining feature, whereas Lewis's interest was less structural; for him, fantasy was a prime vehicle for capturing the elusive quality of joy. But for both Lewis and Tolkien, fantasy had a strong inventive and imaginative component. Fantasies generated in sleep, for instance, would not in themselves be of interest, nor would egocentric daydreaming. The two men were interested in carefully crafted literary fantasy.

I have had to use the word 'theology' in the title of this article in a very loose sense, a sense which I hope will become clear as the exposition proceeds. Broadly, it signifies the implications of the Christian reflection undergirding the exploration of fantasy in these two authors.

It was because of their common theory of imagination that Lewis and Tolkien naturally inclined to literary fantasy, rather than other fictive modes. Let me very briefly sketch the features of their theory.

Lewis in particular saw the imagination as the 'organ of meaning' or reality rather than of conceptual truth:

> *It must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting*

> *forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense... For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself ... the truth we [win] by metaphor [can] not be greater than the truth of the metaphor itself; and ... all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor. And thence, I confess, it does follow that if our thinking is ever true, then the metaphors by which we think must have been good metaphors. It does follow that if those original equations, between good and light, or evil and dark, between breath and soul and all the others, were from the beginning arbitrary and fanciful – if there is not, in fact, a kind of psycho-physical parallelism (or more) in the universe – then all our thinking is nonsensical.*[6]

Imagination, then, is concerned with apprehending realities (even if they belong to the unseen world), rather than grasping concepts. Imaginative invention is justifiable in its own right – it does not have the burden of carrying didactic truths. Both Lewis and Tolkien as writers valued looking at reality in a symbolic way. A further central preoccupation for both of them was imaginative invention (most obviously expressed in Tolkien's concept of sub-creation). This was related to their view of the function of imagination. Products of the imagination are knowledge of sorts, important knowledge, but knowledge discovered by making, essentially not accessible in any other way, and hence different from universal, theoretical truth.

So fiction, for C.S. Lewis, was the making of meaning rather than the literal restating of truths. It reflects the greater creativity of God when he originated and put together his universe and ourselves. Meaning is at the core of real things and events. Natural objects are not mere facts. Objects, events and people are real insofar as they are in relationship to other objects, events and persons, and ultimately in relationship to God. They have a created unity. And their meaning derives from that. The complex web of relationships that is the hallmark of reality confers objects, events and people with meaning. In themselves, they do not mean: they refer elsewhere for their meaning. Their reality is their true meaning. It is on the relationship between the conceptual and the imaginative that C.S. Lewis makes his most distinctive contribution to understanding the imagination. He argues that good imagining is as vital as good thinking, and each is impoverished without the other. This is as true in the natural sciences as it is in the arts. We actually win truth by employing metaphors, or models.

As we have already noted, Tolkien's view of the imagination

centres on his idea of 'sub-creation'. This is most clearly set out in his famous essay, 'On Fairy Stories',[7] and reveals his affinity with the ideas of Coleridge, MacDonald and Lewis. There he speaks of creating secondary worlds with an 'inner consistency of reality'. He also stresses the central importance of human language. It was typical of him to write elsewhere in a similar vein: 'Language has both strengthened imagination and been freed by it'.[8]

There is, then, an understandable preoccupation with fantasy in the fictional writings of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. What are the theological implications of their stance? What does it say, for instance, about their apologetics, their implicit or explicit defence of Christian faith in a world they regarded as essentially hostile to such a message? This preference for fantasy led them to a contemporary alternative to modernism, and a powerful exploration of meaning and reality. This preference is likely to account for their considerable and continuing popularity.[9] Though both men had a marked taste for fantasy, they also had core ideas in common which set them an agenda for their fiction. In order to try to get at these ideas and to unravel some of the fascinating strands of such questions, it is necessary to remember the living context of their writings. It is important to remind ourselves of the remarkable friendship between Lewis and Tolkien. While some will be very familiar with the biographical details of their association, I wish to mention them briefly as a useful framework for considering their theology of fantasy.

Tolkien and Lewis had childhoods strikingly dominated by their imaginations. Lewis in Belfast created Boxen and Animal Land while Tolkien in the English West Midlands invented languages, and fell under the spell of existing languages like Welsh and, later, Gothic. Significantly, both lost their mothers when they were young, Lewis at the age of nine, Tolkien just into his teens. Both started writing seriously during the First World War, in which Lewis was wounded and Tolkien lost two of his closest friends. Tolkien was several years older than Lewis, and had already taught at Leeds University before returning to Oxford to take up another chair and meeting Lewis in 1926. The two met at an English Faculty meeting and it was not long after that that they discovered they shared similar worlds and their association began. They often talked far into the night. Their association was the core around which their literary group, The Inklings, developed.[10]

Their shared beliefs: the heart of a theology of fantasy

A theology of romanticism

The two friends had a great number of shared beliefs that derived from mutual tastes, and particularly from their common faith, which, though orthodox, had an original cast, to say the least. These shared beliefs constitute, I believe, the

heart of a theology of fantasy. In particular, they both shared a theology of romanticism, a movement which stressed the poetic imagination, instinct, emotion and the subjective over against what it saw as a cold rationalism. The term 'romantic theologian', Lewis tells us, was invented by Charles Williams. What Lewis says about Williams in his introduction to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* applies also to himself, and to Tolkien. He particularly identifies romantic love and imaginative literature as the concern of Charles Williams:

> *A romantic theologian does not mean one who is romantic about theology but one who is theological about romance, one who considers the theological implications of those experiences which are called romantic. The belief that the most serious and ecstatic experiences either of human love or of imaginative literature have such theological implications and that they can be healthy and fruitful only if the implications are diligently thought out and severely lived, is the root principle of all his [Williams's] work.*[11]

Whereas a key preoccupation of Charles Williams was romantic love, C.S. Lewis was 'theological' about romantic longing, which he became convinced was properly about the secret of human joy. Tolkien reflected deeply on the theological implications of fairy-tale and myth, particularly the aspect of sub-creation. It is important to note, however, that these experiences are embodied in literature long before the period of Romanticism. Lewis and Tolkien cannot be identified simply as Romantics. Both belonged to an older world than the Romantic movement, believing in an objective dimension to the imagination and fantasy.

In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis reported some of his sensations – responses to natural beauty, and literary and artistic responses – in the belief that others would recognize similar experiences of their own. J.R.R. Tolkien was fascinated by several structural features of fairy-tales and other stories that embodied myths. These features are all related to a sense of imaginative decorum, a sense that imagining can, in itself, be good or bad, with rules or norms that apply strictly in such fantasy, as they do in thought. Meaning can only be created by skill or art, and these play an essential part in human thought and language. As Tolkien said, 'The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval.'[12]

An implied theology of fantasy

Out of their shared beliefs a number of theological features of their preoccupation with fantasy emerge.

Otherness. They shared a sense of the value of otherness – or otherworldliness. Great stories take us outside the prison of our own selves and our presuppositions about reality. Insofar as stories reflect the divine maker in doing this, they help us face the ultimate Other – God himself, distinct as creator from all

else, including ourselves. The very well of fantasy and imaginative invention is every person's direct knowledge of the other. Lewis writes: 'To construct plausible and moving "other worlds" you must draw on the only real "other world" we know, that of the spirit.'[13]

The numinous. For both men, this all-pervasive sense of the other is focused in a quality of the numinous, a basic human experience charted by the thinker Rudolf Otto in his phenomenological study, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). Both successfully embodied this quality in their fiction. The primary numinous experience involves a sense of dependence upon what stands wholly other to mankind. This otherness (or otherworldliness) is in one way unapproachable and certainly awesome. But it has a fascination. The experience of the numinous is captured better by suggestion and allusion than by a theoretical analysis. Many realities captured in imaginative fiction could be described as having some quality of the numinous. C.S. Lewis realized this, incorporating the idea into his apologetic for the Christian view of suffering, *The Problem of Pain*; and he cited an event from Kenneth Grahame's fantasy for children, *The Wind in the Willows*, to illustrate it.[14] The final part of *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* particularly embodies the numinous, as the travellers approach Aslan's Country across the Last Sea (chs. 15, 16).

Many elements in Tolkien's fantasies also convey this quality. Much of the numinous in Tolkien is the effect of his linguistic creativity. His use of Elvish names, words and phrases, which are beautiful and yet foreign, often invokes a numinous quality. Parts of *The Silmarillion*, using an archaic yet powerfully attractive style, also convey the numinous.

In Tolkien's work the numinous is embodied most of all in his idea of Faery – an other world in which it is possible for beings such as Elves to live and move and have a history. The world of the Elves is the focus of *The Silmarillion*, and had a strong attraction for his imagination. Some of his Elves, like Luthien or Galadriel, powerfully embody the numinous in their preternatural beauty and wisdom.

Where the numinous is captured, its appeal is firstly to the imagination, which also senses it most accurately. It belongs to the area of meaning that we cannot easily conceptualize. C.S. Lewis found this when he read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, describing the effect as baptizing his imagination. It was years before he was able to reconcile this experience with his thinking. Tolkien similarly seems to have taken years of reflection (reflection often captured in his letters) to come to terms with his imaginative discoveries.

Joy. Sehnsucht, seen as a yearning or longing that is a pointer to joy, was for Lewis a defining characteristic of fantasy. Both men desired to embody that quality in their work. Though

associated with Lewis, joy is characteristic of Tolkien's fiction too, and deeply valued by him, as his essay 'On Fairy Stories' makes clear. There, Tolkien refers to the quality of joy. It is a key feature of such stories, he believes, related to the happy ending, or *eucatastrophe*, part of the consolation they endow. Tolkien believes that joy in the story marks the presence of grace coming from the world outside of the story, and even beyond our world. 'It denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.' He adds: 'In such stories when the sudden "turn" comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.'[15] In an epilogue to the essay, Tolkien gives more consideration to the quality of joy, linking it to the Gospel narratives, which have all the qualities of an other-worldly, fairy, story, while at the same time being actual world history. This doubleness intensifies the quality of joy, identifying its objective source.

C.S. Lewis explored the quality of longing, both in the quest which led to his Christian conversion, and in his writings. He saw it as the key to joy in human experience. The two men were very much at one in seeking to define and embody this quality. Lewis saw the unquenchable longing as a sure sign that no part of the created world, and thus no aspect of human experience, is capable of fulfilling fallen humankind. We are dominated by a homelessness, and yet by a keen sense of what home means. Such longing, thought Lewis, inspired the writer to create fantasy. The creation of Another World is an attempt to reconcile human beings and the world, to embody the fulfilment of our imaginative longing. Imaginative worlds, wonderlands, are 'regions of the spirit'.[16] Such worlds of the numinous may be found in some science-fiction, some poetry, some fairy-stories, some novels, some myths, even in a phrase or sentence. For Lewis, joy was a foretaste of ultimate reality, heaven itself, or, the same thing, our world as it was meant to be, unspoilt by the fall of mankind, and one day to be remade. 'Joy', he wrote, 'is the serious business of Heaven.' In attempting to imagine heaven, Lewis discovered that joy is 'the secret signature of each soul'. He speculated that the desire for heaven is part of our essential (and unfulfilled) humanity.[17]

In Tolkien, not only is there the quality of joy linked to the sudden turn in the story, the sense of eucatastrophe, but also it is connected to the inconsolable longing, or sweet desire, in Lewis's sense. Dominating the entire cycle of his tales of Middle-earth is a longing to obtain the Undying Lands of the uttermost west. The longing is often symbolized by a longing for the sea, which lay to the west of Middle-earth, and over which lay Valinor, even if by a hidden road.[18]

Sub-creation. This is a key feature of the preoccupation with fantasy in both Lewis and Tolkien. Tolkien in particular believes

that the art of true fantasy or fairy-story writing is sub-creation: creating another or secondary world with such skill that it has an 'inner consistency of reality'. A faery-story is not a story which simply concerns faery beings. They are in some sense other-worldly, having a geography and history surrounding them. Tolkien's key idea is that Faery, the realm or state where faeries have their being, contains a whole cosmos, a microcosm. Faery is sub-creation rather than either mimetic representation or allegorical interpretation of the 'beauties and terrors of the world'. Tolkien's concept of sub-creation is the most distinctive feature of his view of art. Though he saw it in terms of inventive fantasy, the applicability might well prove to be wider. Secondary worlds can take many forms. The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff sees 'world-projection' as one of the universal and most important features of art, particularly fiction. It has large-scale metaphorical power. Wolterstorff claims: '... By way of fictionally projecting his distinct world the fictioneer may make a claim, true or false as the case may be, about our actual world.'[19] Its metaphorical quality deepens or indeed modifies our perception of the meaning of reality.

Recovery. A further feature of fantasy for the two friends was restoration, or recovery. Tolkien, like Lewis, believed that, through story, the real world becomes a more magical place, full of meaning. We see its pattern and colour in a fresh way. The recovery of a true view of things applies both to individual things like hills and stones, and to the cosmic – the depths of space and time itself. For in sub-creation, Tolkien believed, there is a 'survey' of space and time. Reality is captured in miniature. Through sub-creative stories – the type to which *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Tale of Beren and Luthien the Elf-maiden* belong – a renewed view of reality in all its dimensions is given – the homely, the spiritual, the physical, the moral.

Tolkien and Lewis rejected what they saw as the restless quest of the modern world to be original. Meaning was to be discovered in God's created world, not to be created by mankind without him. G.K. Chesterton somewhere speaks of the way that children are normally not tired of familiar experience. In this sense they share in God's energy and vitality; he never tires of telling the sun to rise each morning. The child's attitude is a true view of things, and dipping into the world of story can restore such a sense of freshness. Lewis explains: 'He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.'[20] For Tolkien, fairy-stories help us to make such a recovery – they bring healing – and 'in that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish'.[21]

Natural theology and paganism

Because of the importance they placed on the primary meaning-function of the imagination, both Tolkien and Lewis

were preoccupied with the imaginative fruit of pre-Christian paganism, particularly what might be called enlightened paganism. Such paganism was, as it were, one large case-study for them of their view of imagination. The remainder of my article will explore this highly significant feature of their fantasy, and thus their apologetics.

Most of Tolkien's fiction is set in a pre-Christian world, as was his great model, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, according to his own interpretation of that poem. Similarly, Lewis explored a pagan world in his novel, *Till We Have Faces*. Even while an atheist, Lewis was attracted by the pagan myths of the North, and by the idea of a dying god. In one of his *Latin Letters* Lewis speculates that some modern people may need to be brought to pre-Christian pagan insights in preparation for more adequately receiving the Christian gospel. Tolkien undoubtedly shared this view of pre-evangelism. It is worth exploring the relationship between their theology and their preoccupation with paganism. They are not unusual in making such a link. St Paul in Athens pointed out a striking insight into the truth on the part of several Greek poets as part of his apologetic strategy.[22] In Romans 1:18-32 he points to a universal human knowledge of the truth that is inevitably suppressed because of sin. Though stating a universal truth, Paul's immediate environment is paganism.

In this context of an interest in paganism it is valuable to consider a pattern of thinking and imagining which held sway for many centuries in the West, a pattern which illuminates the work of both Tolkien and Lewis.

Nature and grace

The framework of nature and grace was originally largely an attempt to Christianize a Greek antithesis of Form and Matter, particularly as associated with Aristotle. By the beginning of the thirteenth century an Aristotelian concept of the soul was gaining acceptance among certain Christian philosophers and theologians. Before this acceptance of Aristotle's concept, a Platonic notion of the soul had been popular, largely through Augustine's influence. Aristotle's way of relating the soul and the body in particular was a key instance of the general relationship of Form and Matter.[23] St Thomas Aquinas drew heavily on this Aristotelian concept. The human being actualizes the potentiality of nature, for example, making it knowable by the exercise of human reason. From this arose the idea of natural theology. Truths about God and the world could be known by the unaided human intellect. Only a fuller knowledge of God, the heavenly realm and the spiritual depended on grace. In relation to God, mankind is only potential, a potential actualized by the divine. Mankind is in the middle, between form and matter, God and nature. After Aquinas, the intellect became more and more independent

of divine revelation and grace in relation to knowledge, helping to give rise to the modern sciences.[24]

The framework of nature and grace was the paradigm not only in theology and philosophy but throughout Western culture, influencing artists and writers. Such a cultural paradigm provided a pattern for problem solving.[25] Lewis gracefully portrays the medieval and Renaissance world model in his book, *The Discarded Image*,[26] a model dominated by nature and grace. Integral to the framework is a hierarchy to the created world, ranging from the inanimate, through vegetable and sensible life, to the rational. Mankind straddled the hierarchy present on earth; it was a 'little world' or microcosmos. In a sense, persons in themselves are alternative worlds, potentially the creators of other worlds. Such a view of mankind was immensely liberating to the imagination. In contrast, increasingly mechanistic views of reality reduced mankind to a spatial segment of matter in motion, or to a dualism of mind and body. Expressing the view of man the microcosm, Gregory the Great wrote: 'Because man has existence in common with stones, life with trees, and understanding with angels, he is rightly called by the name of the world.' Similarly, and far later, John Calvin, in his commentary on *Genesis*, finds it quite natural to refer to a human being as a 'world in miniature'.[27]

Natural theology

Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, and Roman Catholicism has always given a high value to natural theology. IVP's *The New Dictionary of Theology* defines natural theology as 'Truths about God that can be learned from created things (nature, man, world) by reason alone'.[28] The Reformation, in contrast, emphasized a return to Scripture alone as the source of knowledge of God, and thus of all else. Nature was interpreted through the lens of Scripture. Tolkien's natural theology is unusual in that his stress is on the imagination, rather than on reason. In contrast, Lewis's use of natural theology applied to both the reason and the imagination. His apologetic approach encompassed both his popular theology and his fiction. Lewis was vigorous in employing reason in defence of Christianity and of the objectivity of truth and morality. But it would be a grave mistake to confuse his commitment to objectivity with Enlightenment-style modernism. For Tolkien (and, to an extent, Lewis) imagination can show genuine insight into God and reality independently of the specific revelation of Scripture. However, Tolkien emphasizes in his essay, 'On Fairy Stories', that any such insights are acts of grace from the Father of Lights. They are a kind of pre-revelation, opening the way to receiving the special revelation of the gospel. Whereas traditional Roman Catholic thought emphasizes the rational and cognitive in natural theology, Tolkien links it with imaginative meaning. It is a complementary revelation to that of the propositional. The story, like language, is evidence of the

image of God still remaining in fallen humankind. He also spoke of 'the seamless web of story', the interrelationship of all story-telling.[29]

Nature

Both Lewis and Tolkien believed that worlds of the imagination are properly based upon the humble and common things of life – what Lewis called 'the quiet fullness of ordinary nature'. Tolkien and Lewis defended fantasy on this basis against the charge of escapism. What Lewis said about Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* could have been Tolkien's words: 'The happiness which it presents to us is in fact full of the simplest and most attainable things – food, sleep, exercise, friendship, the face of nature, even (in a sense) religion.'[30] Such fantasy is the opposite of escapism.[31] It deepens the reality of the real world for us – the terror as well as the beauty. In a sense, nature itself induces fantasy. C.S. Lewis writes: 'Nature has that in her which compels us to invent giants: and only giants will do.'[32]

Again like Lewis, Tolkien believed that nature is best understood as God's creation. When the storyteller is building up a convincing 'Secondary World', he or she in fact is creating, as it were, in the image or as a miniaturization of the 'Primary World'. Such story-making surveys the depth of space and time. Essentially it is the imaginative equivalent of the reason's attempt to capture reality in a single, unified theory. The natural world of God's creating, however, imposes a fundamental limit to the human imagination. We cannot, like God, create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. We can only rearrange elements that God has already made, and which are already brimful with his meanings.

There is more that we could say under each of these headings: for example, seen in connection with the frame of nature and grace, Tolkien's concept of sub-creation has important consequences for epistemology. The implication of his view is that in sub-creation stories take on an inevitable structure, anticipating or referring to the *evangelium*. Grace thus intervenes in the activity of sub-creation, leading to insight into and contact with reality. However, we shall now move on to a specific sub-creation – the matter of elves!

The centrality of elves

Central to human storytelling, indeed its epitome, according to Tolkien, is the fairy story. The concept of 'faerie' had been mutilated, and Tolkien sought to rehabilitate it. In his works, his name for fairies is of course 'elves'. In the equation of story and grace, elves have a significant place. In his invented mythology of Middle-earth, Tolkien intended his elves to be an extended metaphor of a key aspect of human nature. This 'elven quality' in human life was a central preoccupation of

his. Elves, like dwarves, hobbits, and the like, 'partially represent' human beings.[33] In Tolkien's mythology, and also in other fiction of his (such as *Smith of Wootten Major*), elves represent what is high and noble in human beings. In particular, they represent the arts. Tolkien regarded the arts in their highest form as sub-creation, work done in the image of God and his created world. The elves may in fact be taken as a metaphor of human culture, highlighting its meaning. They were to teach their arts and crafts to human beings. By the time of the Fourth Age of Middle-earth and beyond – where mythology such as Tolkien's has moved into history – the elven quality mainly persists in human form. The three ages recorded in Tolkien's Middle-earth stories and annals are pre-Christian. After them will come the Christian era, where the elven quality is perhaps now pre-eminently a spiritual one, associated with Christianity, the grace of the gospel (or *evangelium*), and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Like C.S. Lewis, Tolkien was persuaded by the view of their mutual friend, Owen Barfield, that language and symbolism have become increasingly abstract through history. In Tolkien's beginning, there are real elves (and a real Númenorean civilization). Now there is merely an elven quality to human life, which some can see clearly and others fail to perceive at all. In all the abstraction, there has been a real loss. He sees such a loss restored by the *evangelium*, as he points out in 'On Fairy Stories'. Tolkien argues: 'God is the Lord, of angels, and of man – and of Elves. Legend and history have met and fused.' He concludes: 'Art has been verified.'[34] Tolkien saw the elven quality embodied and made real in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. In his *Letters*[35] Tolkien describes the mythology of Middle-earth as being 'Elf-centred'. The mythology is embodied in *The Silmarillion*. The Elvish framework of *The Silmarillion* particularly shows up when it is compared with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, both of which could be said to be hobbit-centred, the narrative being composed, as it were, by hobbits. This striking shift of perspective reflects the process whereby the elven quality is increasingly embodied in human beings. Hobbits belong to mankind, even though they are diminutive. The embodiment or indeed incarnation of an elven quality in human lives is part of Tolkien's solution to the reconciliation of nature and grace.

Paganism

Reference to the pattern of nature and grace in Tolkien forces us to return to the matter of paganism. As I noted, it seems that for Tolkien (and, to a lesser extent, for Lewis), paganism was a central case-study for the intervention and integration of grace in nature. Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth are set in a thoroughly pagan context. It is a pagan world, like the setting of his great model, *Beowulf*.

Tolkien says that in this poem we see 'man at war with the

hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in time'.[36] The question of the power of evil is central. The hero Beowulf 'moves in a northern heroic age imagined by a Christian, and therefore has a noble and gentle quality, though conceived to be a pagan'.[37] In *Beowulf*, according to Tolkien, there is a fusion of the Christian and the ancient north, the old and the new. The *Beowulf* dragon, as a symbol of evil, retains the ancient force of the pagan northern imagination. The *Beowulf* poet indicates for Tolkien the good that may be found in the pagan imagination, a theme also powerfully explored by C.S. Lewis in *Till We Have Faces*, as we shall see. In holding such a view of what may be called enlightened paganism, Lewis was heavily influenced by Tolkien. Tolkien's conclusion is that 'In *Beowulf* we have, then, an historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at one...It is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical.'[38]

There are a number of parallels between the author of *Beowulf*, as understood by Tolkien, and Tolkien himself. Tolkien is a Christian scholar looking back to an imagined northern European past. The *Beowulf* author was a Christian looking to the imaginative resources of a pagan past. Both made use of dragons and other potent symbols, symbols which unified their work. Both are concerned with symbolism. Like the ancient author, also, Tolkien created an illusion of history and a sense of depths of the past. Like the *Beowulf* poet, and characteristically, Tolkien was concerned with the issue of evil. Tolkien's world in general is replete with Christian heroes and yet it is a pagan world. Ultimately, grace successfully spiritualizes nature. The fading of the elves is sad for the elves. Aragorn, however, stands at the end of the Third Age with Arwen at his side, a reminder of ancient Lúthien in her grace and beauty. The future ages are full of the promise of the *evangelium*. The White Tree had at last flowered, a sign of permanent and ultimate victory over evil.

Tolkien's treatment of paganism has the same potency that he found in *Beowulf*. The potency is also there in C.S. Lewis's own great exploration of pre-Christian paganism, *Till We Have Faces*.[39] This novel strikingly reveals the imaginative and theological affinity between the two men.

In Lewis's story, Princess Psyche is prepared to die for the sake of the people of Glome, a barbaric country somewhere to the north of the Greeklands. In the story Lewis retells an old classical myth, that of Cupid and Psyche, in the realistic setting of a historical novel. It is set several hundred years BC. The story is told through the eyes of Queen Orual of Glome. Having heard a legend in the nearby land of Essur, similar to the myth of Cupid and Psyche, she seeks to set the record straight. The gods, she claims, have distorted the story in certain key respects. She recognizes herself and her half-sister Psyche in the newly sprung-up legend. The gods, she said, had

called her deep love for Psyche jealousy. They had also said that she saw Psyche's Palace, whereas Orual had only seen shapes in a mist, a fantasy that momentarily resembled a palace. There had been no evidence that Psyche had married a god and dwelt in his Palace. Orual therefore recounts her version of the story, being as truthful as possible. She had a reader in mind from the Greeklands, and agreed with the Greek demand for truth and rational honesty.

The short second part of the novel – still in Orual's voice – continues a few days later. Orual has undergone a devastating undeception, whereby, in painful self-knowledge, she has discovered how her affection for Psyche had become poisoned by possessiveness. In this discovery, which allows the restoration of a true love for Psyche, was the consolation that she had also been Psyche. She had suffered on Psyche's behalf, in a substitutionary manner, bearing her burdens and thus easing her tasks. By what Charles Williams called 'the Way of Exchange', Orual had thus helped Psyche to be reunited with her divine husband. With the curing of her poisoned love, Orual in a vision sees that she has become herself beautiful. She has gained a face in becoming a full person. After this reconciliation, the aged queen Orual dies, her narration ending with her.

In this tale, two loves, affection and eros, are especially explored. Another motif is that of substitution and atonement. Psyche is prepared to die for the sake of the people of Glome. Orual is a substitute for much of Psyche's suffering and pain. Psyche herself represents a kind of Christ-likeness, though she is not intended as a figure of Christ. Lewis wrote, in explanation, to Clyde S. Kilby:

> *Psyche is an instance of the* anima naturaliter Christiana *making the best of the pagan religion she is brought up in and thus being guided (but always 'under the cloud,' always in terms of her own imagination or that of her people) towards the true God. She is in some ways like Christ not because she is a symbol of him but because every good man or woman is like Christ.*[40]

This limitation of pagan imagination comes out in the ugly figures of Ungit and the Shadow-brute, deformed images of the brighter Greek deities of Venus (Aphrodite) and Cupid. The truth that these poor images are trying to glimpse is even more beautiful, free of the vindictiveness of the Greek deities. Psyche is able to see a glimpse of the true God himself, in all his beauty, and in his legitimate demand for a perfect sacrifice. Thus Lewis, like Tolkien, endorses insights of paganism.

The pattern of nature and grace, as exemplified in Lewis and Tolkien, is a fundamentally pre-modernist one. Both men were medieval scholars, and belonged imaginatively to that period. However, these kinds of enterprises, with their profound sensitivity to patterns, are rare in contemporary Christian

thinking and imagining.[41] Because the source of our authority is an ancient book, such thought and imagination has primarily a pre-modernist orientation. Yet, of course, it needs to be thoroughly contemporary.[42] The success of Tolkien and Lewis as contemporary Christian writers must be taken seriously by all concerned with communicating Christian faith today. In this article, I have sought not to address the theological questions involved in the enjoyment of fantasy by Tolkien and Lewis. But I trust it has been a stimulus – to thought and imagination alike – leading perhaps to more important issues, often overlooked.

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1 *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis (London: Bles, 1966), p. 260.

2 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Hyman, 2nd edn, 1988).

3 This is not to diminish the importance of related events that may be going on in the unseen world, as in the vision of Elisha's servant (2 Ki. 6:15-17). Symbols are necessary to capture such visions. John, for instance, drew upon the symbolic language of Daniel and Ezekiel (Dn. 10:1-9; Ezk. 1:26-28; Rev. 1:12-16) to described the glorified Christ in the book of Revelation.

4 See Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (London: Faber, 2nd edn, 1952).

5 Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: from 1200 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 5.

6 C.S. Lewis set out some key ideas in an essay entitled 'Bluspels and Flanansferes', in his book *Rehabilitations* (1939). There are a number of suggestive ideas here, many of which Lewis developed and refined in later years, leading to his definitive statement about literature, *An Experiment in Criticism*. We may summarize some of the basic ideas as follows: (1) There is a distinction between reason and imagination as regards roles – reason has to do with theoretical or conceptual truths, imagination has to do with the very conditions of truth. (2) There are standards of correctness, or norms, for the imagination, held tacitly and universally by human beings, just as there are for the mind. (3) There was originally a unity between image and reality which reflects an objective state of affairs. The idea of an ancient unity of consciousness is relevant here – what Barfield called 'original participation'. (4) The framing of truths in propositions necessitates the employment of metaphors supplied by the imagination. Language and thought necessarily rely upon metaphor. This is as true in scientific as in religious or in ordinary discourse. Imagination is a maker of meaning, a definer of terms in a proposition, and as such is a condition of truth.

7 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *Tree and Leaf*, op. cit.

8 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'A Secret Vice', in *The Monsters and The Critics and Other Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 219.

9 For example, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* came number one in two readers' polls in 1997, one conducted by Waterstones' bookshops and the other by the Folio Society.

10 For a study see Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978).

[11] C.S. Lewis, Preface to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).
[12] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', op. cit., p. 24.
[13] C.S. Lewis, 'On Stories', in *Of This and Other Worlds* (London: Collins, 1982), pp. 35f.
[14] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Bles, 1940), p. 6.
[15] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', op. cit., pp. 62, 63.
[16] See Lewis, 'On Stories', op. cit., p. 35.
[17] See Lewis's speculations in Chapter 10, 'Heaven', in *The Problem of Pain*, op. cit., and 'The Weight of Glory', in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (London: Collins Fontana, 1965).
[18] See Colin Duriez, 'Joy', and related articles in *The Tolkien and Middle-earth Handbook* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992).
[19] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
[20] C.S. Lewis, 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children', in *Of This and Other Worlds*, op. cit., p. 65.
[21] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, op. cit.
[22] Acts 17:6-31.
[23] For further information, see Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1936), and Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1960).
[24] See Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Leicester: IVP, 1968).
[25] For more on socio-cultural paradigms, see T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
[26] C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).
[27] John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 92.
[28] 'Natural theology', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Packer, Ferguson and Wright (Leicester: IVP, 1988).
[29] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', op. cit.
[30] Lewis, 'On Stories', op. cit., p. 38.
[31] Tolkien rightly distinguishes between improper and proper escape – the flight of the deserter and the escape of the wrongly imprisoned (Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', op. cit.), p. 56.
[32] Lewis, 'On Stories', op.cit., p. 31.
[33] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), Letter 131.
[34] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 66.
[35] Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 181.
[36] J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in The *Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, op. cit., p. 18.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 26.
[39] C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (London: Bles, 1956).
[40] *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, p. 274.
[41] The importance of these kind of patterns or paradigms cannot be overestimated, because they concern the fundamental problem-solving and social orientation of a culture. The depth of such patterns is only partly captured by the more familiar concept of a world-view (as in, for example, the excellent study by James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Leicester: IVP, 3rd edn 1997).
[42] John Stott's *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) argues the case forcefully for being both biblically faithful and contemporary.