

# J.R.R. Tolkien: Lover of the Logos

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Tolkien's is an exquisitely proleptic art that takes a pagan, pre-Christian universe and suffuses it discreetly with a sacramental holiness stemming implicitly from what Balthasar makes bold to call the Christ form.

The splendour falls on castle walls  
And snowy summits old in story:  
The long light shakes across the lakes,  
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.  
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,  
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear  
And thinner, clearer, farther going!  
O sweet and far from cliff and scar  
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!  
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:  
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.  
(Song from Tennyson's "Princess")

This past year marked the hundredth anniversary of the birth of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1972), the nondescript, hobbitic Oxford don who has posthumously found himself ensconced in an enigmatic literary niche all his own, outside all the accepted and honored canons of modern literature. For his is not a name today's literary critical establishment conjures with. His stolid, conventional figure sorts ill with the promethean icons of modernism, men like D.H. Lawrence and

James Joyce. Indeed, his fictional work has elicited withering contempt from more than one luminary in the world of humane letters. Edmund Wilson, the famous American critic, for example, called it "juvenile trash." Even Edwin Muir, a poet and critic of otherwise sublime perceptiveness and sensitivity, attacked it trenchantly, although with less acid than Wilson, in a review entitled, with superciliously descriptive derision, "A Boy's World." The English poet W.H. Auden, on the other hand, considered it a masterpiece, as have many other scarcely less distinguished readers.

Yet, when all is said and done, *The Lord of the Rings* (henceforth LOTR), cocking a snook at its detractors, remains one of the most popular and best-selling books of the twentieth century. It remains most admirably a "story that can mediate imaginative life to the masses while not being contemptible to the few," a quality that C.S. Lewis lamented as one that is much too infrequently to be found in modern literature.<sup>1</sup> The schism between highbrow and lowbrow, which has come more and more to be a distinctive condition of our own modern world of letters, was merely inchoate in the nineteenth century, the century of Tolkien's birth, which witnessed the teeming, universal fecundity of a writer like Dickens. And Dickens, while exemplary in this respect, by no means stood alone amongst his contemporaries in the breadth and ease of his intelligibility.

In another essay, Lewis remarks on "the astonishing intensity of the dislike which some readers feel for the mythopoeic."<sup>2</sup> In his own landmark essay, "On Fairy Stories,"<sup>3</sup> Tolkien himself notes the strong and inexplicable hostility which many evince towards the unabashedly escapist element in fantastic literature. For Tolkien, escape is one of the four great and laudable characteristic marks of the fairy story, together with what he termed fantasy, recovery, and consolation. "Why should a man be scorned," Tolkien asks with a rhetorical flourish, "if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get

<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, edited, with a preface, by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 18.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>3</sup>"On Fairy-Stories," by J.R.R. Tolkien, in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, edited by C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), 38-89. Henceforth cited as OFS.

out and go home?"<sup>4</sup> "For it is after all possible," Tolkien avers with a swingeing blow at industrial capitalism, "for a rational man, after reflection (quite unconnected with fairy-story or romance), to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of 'escapist' literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable,' products."<sup>5</sup> Tolkien goes on approvingly to quote Christopher Dawson on the "'rawness and ugliness of modern European life'—that real life whose contact we should welcome—[which] 'is the sign of biological inferiority, of an insufficient or false reaction to environment.'"<sup>6</sup> With a severe teleological eye, Tolkien deprecatingly adjudges our age as one of "improved means to deteriorated ends."<sup>7</sup>

Tolkien was, we may say without any further ado, a shameless reactionary, a radical tory who could not stomach the pomps and works of the modern age, who found his own escape from it in the compelling, sub-creative afflatus of his fantastic art, which, in turn, percolated out from the well-springs of his Christianity and his philological scholarship. LOTR bears the texture of both these stimuli, but in a beguilingly idiosyncratic way—at once old-fashioned and strikingly original—a perfect illustration of the subtle and harmonious balance struck by the humble piety of individual talent in the face of tradition's ponderous and sometimes daunting canonical weight.

It seems to me that of all the ways of looking at Tolkien's mythopoetic genius, at the truths that he breathes with praeternatural elvish craft through silver,<sup>8</sup> the most comprehensive and over-arching way would be to see it as falling into the category of a game—something that the ancients saw as being far from shallow and sophomoric, merely a children's thing, as we might be tempted to see it. Plato links play with culture, denominating these two ideas as the things he deems most serious. These two words, "play" and "culture," are,

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>8</sup>To amend a pejorative phrase of C.S. Lewis to the effect that fairy story making is "breathing a lie through silver."

moreover, closely cognate in the original Greek. This is no accident of etymology. There are untold and fascinating intellectual depths to this idea of play, which Huizinga's magisterial work, *Homo Ludens*, goes far towards explicating.<sup>9</sup> It strikes me as being one of modern intellectual history's *idées maîtresses*, a superb interpretive tool with the help of which we may arrive at a better understanding of Tolkien's achievement and, adversatively, a keener insight into the poverty of thought and form that blankets modern literature like a miasmic counterpane of marsh gas.

Tolkien's universe, it seems to me, bids fair to betray an exceedingly rich concatenation of meanings precisely when it is conceived *sub specie ludi*, to draw on a key phrase of Huizinga's. What this means is that Tolkien's enchanted world of *faërie* is best and most fruitfully considered as an ordered, thaumaturgic field of play, set up in a sacral mode, we might almost say, to yield the impression of "distance and a great abyss of time, not measurable even by *two thousand Jahr*,"<sup>10</sup> to use Tolkien's own allusive phrase. LOTR is quite literally predicated on illusion. That is to say, it is rooted in play, *in-lusio*, as the etymology of the word indicates. Huizinga explains that:

In the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression. Gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself upon it; but the primary thing is and remains play.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the most salient idea here is that of a "sacred order of things." Play, we may say, is almost by definition a promoter of a now defunct hierarchical notion of existence, placing its participants, including man, within a Great Chain of Being, a cosmic dance of differentiated forms that fill the diapason of creation. The sense of this cosmic dance no longer obtains. Man no longer has a real or symbolic place within reality. Distinctions have collapsed, inasmuch as they have lost their predicate of cosmic play. That great and supple medieval

<sup>9</sup>Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

<sup>10</sup>OFS, 57.

<sup>11</sup>*Homo Ludens*, 17-18.

verb *distinguo* no longer informs the metaphysical temper of modern man, for it has been driven into a Cartesian ghetto of science and technology. This affects man's art, so that his fiction, as Chesterton points out, "is simply dissolving into separate fragments and then into formlessness."<sup>12</sup>

It remains a supreme, but understandable, irony that Tolkien's "illusive" universe, after a decade of limited fame, took its first dramatic rise to the stratospheric heights of mass popularity at the very moment in the mid 1960s when the Church was in the throes of making its cultic worship more "relevant" by shearing off from it the ordered, hieratic dimension of sacred play. For many orphaned souls, asphyxiated by the banality of modern life, Tolkien was opening a window to transcendence that was just then being peremptorily drawn shut by the officious matrons of this liturgical revolution.

At any rate, from this conception of LOTR as a ritualized literary form of play, certain crucial corollaries may be derived. In the first place, LOTR is the playworld of a philologist, who is, literally from the Greek, "a lover of words." Sadly and very significantly this designation has nowadays become nearly as quaint and anachronistic as calling a physician a leech, for example, or a clergyman a man of the cloth. From this hoary notion termed philology, however, there arises a whole cluster of associations, revolving etymologically around the Greek word *logos*. Chief amongst these is the upper-case version of this redoubtable word, denoting the second person of the Blessed Trinity, the pre-existing Word, become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. One of the most noteworthy pre-figurations of the Word in the Old Testament is that found in Proverbs (8: 22-23, 30-31), where Wisdom, in a passage of exquisite poetic beauty, is described in an attitude of enraptured play before the Lord from the immeasurable depths of time. It is a commonplace amongst commentators that this figure of Wisdom, although it is created and not pre-existent, is a partial analogue, at least, to the Word in St. John's Gospel, the Word who took on human flesh and "pitched his tent amongst us," as the Greek reads with graphic literalness. This enfleshment of the Word is at the heart of the whole Christian *weltanschauung*,

<sup>12</sup>The *Collected Works of Chesterton*, vol. XXXV: *The Illustrated London News 1929-1931*, edited by Lawrence J. Clipper (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 271.

for it signals an explicit sacramentalization of the cosmos, a mighty, encaustic hallowing of nature.

Christ becomes "the measure not only of revelation but even of the 'natural' forms of cosmos and history," as Louis Dupré points out regarding "Balthasar's thesis that a Christian aesthetic transforms all appearances in the light of the Christ form."<sup>13</sup> It is this incarnational aesthetic, so brilliantly articulated by Balthasar, that is remarkably coincident with Tolkien's fictional oeuvre, as well as his slender, but highly stimulating and original, corpus of speculative thought. Small wonder, too, since the governing intellectual predisposition behind Balthasar's theology is above all philological and aesthetic. For Balthasar the Incarnation is the definitive form of Christ's humanity. It is not:

. . . a randomly adopted form, extrinsic to God's inner life. . . . [Rather] God is able to express *himself* in Jesus because *he is expressive in his divine nature*, and Christ's humanity, far from being a concession made to human frailty in God's self-revelation, is the divine reality itself as it becomes manifest.<sup>14</sup>

Also noteworthy is Balthasar's preoccupation with the loss of the sense of the mystery of Being, with its mythical and poetic manifestations, which lie outside the ken of the foreshortened Cartesian categories of our post-Renaissance world.<sup>15</sup> Similarly Tolkien, with his finely honed philological sensibilities, perceived a declension of life and vigor, an overweening rationalism, starting at the time of Spenser already, in the English literary tradition. In his brilliantly revisionary polemic against the then modern scholarly critics of *Beowulf*, Tolkien mounted a serious, but in many ways still quite allusive, defense of the mythological imagination. He argued that the monsters were not, as had hitherto been thought, "an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness."<sup>16</sup> In this piece, delivered in 1936 before

<sup>13</sup>Louis Dupré, "The Glory of the Lord," in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 16 (Fall, 1989): 401.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 391-92.

<sup>16</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *An Anthology*

the British Academy, Tolkien proposed that far from being a hopeless muddle of Scandinavian bogies and the Christian Scriptures, the Old English poem was a brilliant artistic fusion of pagan and Christian elements. It should be recalled at this point that Tolkien was all his life a faithful and devout Catholic, so that this was no exercise in vapid syncretism, in the manner of today's naive, myopic nostalgia for the pagan "world we have lost."<sup>17</sup> Tolkien, as a scholar, knew well how cruel and savage paganism could be and suffered from no sugar-and-spice fancies about the noble pagan. Even so he was able to say that: "The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned."<sup>18</sup>

One could easily suppose this comment, hinging as it does on the concept of *pietas*, to presage the intellectual thrust of his own masterwork, which he was on the brink of beginning in earnest, where we encounter *pius* Frodo, suffering like Aeneas the arduous burdens of duty, which carry the freight of enormous historical consequences. There is, one feels throughout LOTR, a close kinship of sentiment between Tolkien and the ancient pagan Roman poet, whose work, while pregnant with Rome's triumphal glory, is colored by a poignant, heart-aching tincture of *lacrimae rerum*. Even in the glory of Rome's founding there is the canker of mortality and decay, just as the saving of middle-earth brings no final rest and contentment for Frodo, no final satisfaction of unnamed longings. There is indeed an astonishing concurrence of feeling between

of *Beowulf* Criticism, edited by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 68.

<sup>17</sup>This is an attitude that seemed to reach its high-water mark this past year, the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America by Christopher Columbus. Facile anthropological reductions abounded: the native people of the Americas were nature's unspoiled children until they were brutally and unscrupulously exploited by their European conquerors. Those who give themselves over to this crude, unhistorical animus against the European colonizers have nonetheless an excuse of sorts inasmuch as their point of departure is "a Western objection to the disappearance or attenuation of human riches within the West itself," as Robert Royal points out [in 1492 *And All That: Political Manipulations of History*, as quoted in *Chronicles* (October, 1992): 31]. By the same token the reading of Tolkien has been erected by some into a blasphemous cult in a reaction to the desacralization of our culture.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

Tolkien's trilogy and the *Aeneid*, so much so that we might in a spirit of lighter, allusive play call LOTR *The Frodiad*.

For the rhetorician Richard Weaver, piety is "a crowning concept which governs [modern man's] attitude towards the totality of the world."<sup>19</sup> Weaver comments that

piety is a discipline of the will through respect. It admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego. And, before we can bring harmony back into a world where now everything seems to meet 'in mere oppugnancy,' we shall have to regard with the spirit of piety three things: nature, our neighbors—by which I mean all other people—and the past.<sup>20</sup>

This triad of nature, neighbors, and past defines the *pietas* in Tolkien's trilogy, forming an ordered, structural framework within which the enfleshed Logos finds its relational field of play. This whole issue of *pietas* raises questions about the place of Christianity and, indeed, religion in general in Tolkien's fiction. In LOTR religion of any kind is virtually absent in any overt form. There is absolutely no indication of cult or ritual. A whole significant anthropological dimension is missing—to the deep puzzlement and even dismay of those familiar with Tolkien's own uncompromising Christian piety. T.A. Shippey points out that, "the whole of Middle-earth, in a sense, is limbo."<sup>21</sup> That is to say, it is a middle place between the antipodes of heaven and hell, but without that notion of cleansing which is associated with purgatory. In 1953, Tolkien wrote to a Jesuit friend:

*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion,' to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 170.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 171-72.

<sup>21</sup>T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 153. This is an unusually acute and sophisticated study of Tolkien's art which treats it with the air of serious scholarship that it deserves.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted by Shippey, 153.

This avoidance of overt religiosity seems a wise and judicious move on Tolkien's part, for it steered him clear of the real dangers, including that of blasphemy, which he would have courted had he approached too near the uniqueness of the gospel story. At the very least he might have been inveigled into using allegory, a form which he cordially detested and seduously avoided in LOTR. In this he echoes Balthasar, who remarks that:

Plato reduced that which was original to the status of the derivative. In so doing, he became the father of all who have put *allegory* (i.e., discourse about something else) in the place of *symbol* (i.e., a true sign), and also the father of all those who adopt a wholly superfluous and only apparently scientific attitude in order to investigate psychologically how the soul can break out of its interiority and enter the so-called 'exterior world.'<sup>23</sup>

By recurring to story and symbol, Tolkien bypassed the manifold dangers of allegory and mediated to his readers the Incarnate Logos, manifesting thereby what Balthasar called "the diversity of the Invisible radiating in the visibleness of Being in the world."<sup>24</sup> Tolkien's is an exquisitely proleptic art that takes a pagan, pre-Christian universe and suffuses it discreetly with a sacramental holiness stemming implicitly from what Balthasar makes bold to call the Christ form. This is what Tolkien really means by the "glamour of Poesis," a term he draws on to characterize *Beowulf*.<sup>25</sup> It is truly the Christ form that is at the heart of the realm he calls *faërie*, which he professes to be almost beyond definition, as if to speak of it were to touch on some ineffable mystery, too close to Being itself to be more than dimly apprehensible. In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien is reduced to discussing it periphrastically, as it were, in a leaping, frolicsome play of poetic images. This puzzles T.A. Shippey, who supposes that Tolkien was talking down to his unlearned audience. What we encounter rather is Tolkien being "grave-merry," *spoudogéloios*,

<sup>23</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, edited by Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 20-21.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted by Dupré, 385.

<sup>25</sup>Tolkien, "Monsters," 54.

evinced another of the most salient aspects of play, in imitation of the Logos who has been at play before the Father from time immemorial.<sup>26</sup> In this vein Tolkien explains, using the tangible touchstones of natural and man-made phenomena, that:

*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fairies, and besides dwarves, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons; it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. . . . *Faërie* itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic.<sup>27</sup>

For Tolkien nature has a most realistic epistemological anchor, inasmuch as it is blessed with meaning and substance by the Christ form. And, Tolkien makes clear, it is our privilege, within the created order illumined by the Christ form, to act as sub-creators. "Fantasy," he affirms, "remains a 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 a Maker."<sup>28</sup> Sub-creation is a form of participation in the divine life as communicated to us by the Incarnate Logos. As Balthasar explains it:

The light of faith cannot . . . be thought or even experienced as a merely immanent reality in our soul, but solely as the radiance resulting from the presence in us of a *lumen increatum*, a *gratia increata*, without our ever being able to abstract from God's Incarnation.<sup>29</sup>

Through God's revelation of his divine Son there is established a unique *sensorium* in our souls.<sup>30</sup> Tolkien is a poet of this *sensorium*. Under its guidance and illumination he fashions his regard on the created things of our world, which he incorporates into his sub-creative art. In doing this, he incurs the furious wrath and scorn of those whose internal *sensoria* are wan and attenuated, who favor an extrinsic, empirical *sen-*

<sup>26</sup>On this point see Hugo Rahner's *Man at Play or Did You Ever Practise Eutrapelia?* (London: Burns and Oates, 1965). Rahner expands and corroborates Huizinga's thesis from a more explicitly Christian perspective.

<sup>27</sup>OFS, 42-43.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>29</sup>As quoted in Dupré, 402.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Dupré, 403.

itorium, which is merely a shadow of a shade, generating in the realm of art the pallid simulacra of social realism. Or else, conversely, feeling the gnawing want of a logocentric *sensorium*, the enemies of Tolkien and all that he represents recur to a purely immanent *sensorium* of their own self-sufficient making, internalizing and psychologizing the splendors of creation in a desperate effort to bridge the yawning, empty chasm of their *non serviam*. What results in this latter case are the chaotic, palsied lucubrations of a James Joyce and his spawn of imitators, most without a tithe of his undoubted, albeit ultimately sterile and distorted, talent. The Joycean stream of consciousness technique is probably the most powerful solvent of literature's traditional narrative patterns, the end term, in the literature of the West, of the "complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action."<sup>31</sup>

Tolkien's work and thought constitute a radical rejection of the whole modern project in literature, represented by iconic figures like Joyce. That is why Tolkien and his Christian compatriots at Oxford, the Inklings, as they were known, are so easy to dismiss, so awkward to defend, even by their champions. Critics footnote them with categorical omniscience as neo-Romantic throwbacks, which indeed they were, inasmuch as they too were faced, like the Romantics of the nineteenth century, with the depredations and metaphysical deflections of industrial capitalism. But there were important differences, the prime one being that the Inklings were by and large traditional Christians,<sup>32</sup> which the Romantics most emphatically were not. The reactionary impulses of the latter were unchanneled and essentially gnostic, couched oftentimes in sordid lives of moral degeneracy. For all their lyrical brilliance and sensitivity to the problematic of the time, they were squanderers of the moral capital that yet remained after the convulsions of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 552. Cf. also Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* for a less eulogistic discussion of the ramifications of Western culture's loss of a sense of orderly, narrative pattern—another repudiation essentially of the matrix of structured play that informs a healthy civilization.

<sup>32</sup>except figures like the anthroposophist Owen Barfield.

<sup>33</sup>Witness Byron and also more graphically Shelley, who sought as a poet

Tolkien, on the other hand, binds together the sun-drenched realms of heaven and earth and attempts to heal the rupture between them. For the eternal Maker is incarnately manifest in Tolkien's work through his sub-creator's own deeply informed Christian piety, which evinces a humble outlook on a universe irradiated by an indwelling *lumen increatum*. LOTR is distinctive in its minute and sacramental regard for mundane particulars. Tolkien expended great care and effort in his descriptions of topography and weather, in synchronizing, for example, dates and phases of the moon and sun. Most striking of all, of course, is his elaborate, indeed, quite monumentally unparalleled, concern for the languages of his middle earth. In fact Tolkien goes so far as to say that languages were the *fons et origo* of his wondrously articulated play-world. This has been thought disingenuous by some critics, who unfortunately do not properly conceive the place of philology in the constitution of Tolkien's worldview.

In his essay, "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien takes serious issue with cultural anthropologist Max Muller's description of mythology as a disease of language. Soaring once again in a Chestertonian flight of fancy, Tolkien inverts Muller's aetiology, arguing instead that language is a disease of mythology. The "disease" of language lies at the very foundations of man's sub-creative faculty, since:<sup>34</sup>

The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent. And that is not surprising: such incantations might indeed be said to be only another view of adjectives, a part of speech in a mythical grammar. The mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into swift water.<sup>35</sup>

Further on in this same essay Tolkien seizes on "fantasy" as a word "which will embrace both the sub-creative

to create "forms more real than living men." In "Prometheus Unbound," I, 748.

<sup>34</sup>Shippey, 42.

<sup>35</sup>OFS, 50.

art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image."<sup>36</sup> It seems to me quite significant that he capitalizes the word "Image," imparting to it in this context a kind of Platonic numinousness which makes one suspect immediately that it is meant to be coterminous with something higher and transcendental. Is Tolkien referring here to the Logos? It is probable that he is. It should be cautioned, however, that Tolkien is not by any means a Platonic idealist, for he is always careful to link the *numen* of language and myth with the palpable realities of this world. He makes it clear at every turn that he is an epistemological realist. If he were not, his middle earth would cloy and sicken the palate. What he seeks through fantasy to escape is "the domination of observed 'fact'" in our Primary World, as he calls it.<sup>37</sup> When Tolkien discusses recovery, another of the four key characteristics of the fairy story, he defines it as "regaining a clear view . . . 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves."<sup>38</sup> This admonition to see things as being apart from ourselves is yet another solvent of any lingering suspicion that Tolkien might be just another solipsistic conjurer.

Rather, the foundations of his epistemology are solidly those of St. Thomas, who argues that, "perfect intellectual judgment is acquired in us by an aversion to sensible things, which are the first principles of our knowledge."<sup>39</sup> In another passage of the *Summa Theologiae*, where he is talking about prophetic knowledge, St. Thomas says that the imaginative vision of the prophets is a mediate faculty between the senses and the intellect.<sup>40</sup> Tolkien's definition of the imagination, as "the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality,"<sup>41</sup> seems congruent with St. Thomas's judgment on the *visio imaginaria*. But Tolkien's more immediate

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>39</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, 173, 3. "In nobis perfectum iudicium intellectus habetur per conversionem ad sensibilia, quae sunt prima nostrae cognitionis principia."

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 174, 3. "Visio imaginaria in cognitione prophetica est sicut quoddam medium."

<sup>41</sup>OFS, 66.

forebear in this area of critical theory regarding the imagination was undoubtedly Coleridge, who defines what he calls Primary Imagination as, "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."<sup>42</sup> Coleridge links the creative imagination with an imitation of *natura naturans*, not a mere copying of *natura naturata*. Tolkien agrees with Coleridge by and large, except that he makes adjustments to Coleridge's categorization of fancy.<sup>43</sup> Tolkien elevates fantasy (or fancy as Coleridge called it), making it an aspect of the powers of the imagination. Both these terms for Tolkien fall under the rubric of sub-creation. What is extremely interesting here is the *natura naturans* vs. *natura naturata* distinction, the active vs. the passive role of nature. Might we not postulate here the active *natura naturans* as the philosophical analogue of the Christ form, which molds and textures the imitative sub-creative act?

In "Of Fairy Stories," Tolkien speaks about an even simpler expedient to effect recovery than fairy-stories, namely, humility, which he couples with Mooreffoc or Chestertonian fantasy. Mooreffoc is coffee-room, "viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle."<sup>44</sup> We may take this reference to humility, with its etymological antecedents in the Latin for "earth" or "soil," as yet another corroboration of Tolkien's firm intent to remain closely moored to the tangible manifestations of man and nature. Tolkien's preoccupation with humility is evident at the very heart of his masterwork, where it is lowly and unprepossessing hobbits, Frodo and Sam, who are chosen to save the Shire and the free lands of middle earth from their extreme peril. The juxtaposition of humble, comfort-loving hobbits and grand adventures on a heroic scale makes for a dialectical equipoise that is altogether unique, evincing yet another striking aspect of play, which is by its very nature com-

<sup>42</sup>*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Enlarged Edition, edited by Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 374.

<sup>43</sup>A term which Tolkien glosses as "a reduced and depreciatory form of the older word as Fantasy," OFS, 66.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 74.

pounded of the give and take of agonistic tensions. This is Tolkien's brilliant way of absorbing the *exaltavit humiles* of the Magnificat or Christ's "I am meek and lowly of heart" into the story and the symbolism of his trilogy, to paraphrase his own words, as quoted above.

After broaching the idea of Mooreffoc in this same essay "Of Fairy Stories," Tolkien continues in a poetically aphoristic manner, underlining the humble, earth-bound, incarnate origins of fantasy:

Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory.<sup>45</sup>

Which is to say that, "both theoretically and in their historical origins, poetry and theology perfectly coincide."<sup>46</sup> The metaphor of play, with its paradoxical notion of grave-merriness, is very much an enabling mechanism, allowing Tolkien, both in his fiction and in his essays, to capture with magnificent aesthetic aplomb these epistemological niceties which are forever atremble on the edge of a yawning abyss of distortion. After all, heresy is quite literally the choice to emphasize one aspect of any given truth over another, thus upsetting the dynamic contextual relation of the elements that go to make up that truth. Play tends to ritualize and balance the mutual connections of these elements. Perhaps that is why the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* is so axiomatically self-evident in theology. Show me how you pray (i.e., play liturgically) and I'll be able to tell what it is you believe. If one grants the supreme anthropological importance of play, one might even postulate that the more quintessentially playful (in the sense of hieratic ritual) our prayer is, the more coherent is our system of beliefs. Besides the question of particulars and transcendentals, the idea of play allows Tolkien to adumbrate the delicate paradoxes of the gospel, like that of the humble confounding the proud and the mighty.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>46</sup>Balthasar, *Glory*, Vol. I, 83.

There are several other clear and remarkable indications of the logocentricity of Tolkien's mind and art. In the essay "On Fairy Stories," he reproduces a pithy passage in doggerel verse from a letter of exculpation he once sent to the unnamed man,<sup>47</sup> who described fairy-story making as "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 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 seed of dragons—'twas our right  
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:  
We make still by the law in which we're made.'<sup>48</sup>

Once again we have a delightfully "grave-merry" piece, encompassing the very kernel of Tolkien's manifestly theological aesthetics. Tolkien alludes to the fall of Adam and Eve, suggesting that it was this event which caused the single white light to be splintered through man, whom he calls metaphorically the refracted light. This splintering process seems paradoxically to be a good, for it produces a glorious diffusion of light in various combinations and hues. Tolkien was a man "who was deeply in love with the forms of existence."<sup>49</sup> The white light or Logos<sup>50</sup> or Christ form, as we may doubtless call

<sup>47</sup>This man was in fact C.S. Lewis, as was mentioned earlier. It should be noted that C.S. Lewis made this remark early on in his career, years before he penned the Narnia stories.

<sup>48</sup>OFS, 71-72.

<sup>49</sup>Balthasar, *Glory*, Vol. I, 24.

<sup>50</sup>Note that phonologically, at least, the Greek words for "light" (i.e., *phainein* and its cognates) and "word" (i.e., *phonein* and its cognates) can be traced back to a common Indo-European root *bla*, which can mean either "shine" or "speak." Whether there is an actual semantic connection between these two concepts, indicating some perceptual commonality now long lost in the aboriginal murk of time, is a moot point. In any case, the concepts of "light" and "word" enjoyed a close metaphorical partnership in Tolkien's universe.



it, brings in its train a splendid incarnational richness that adorns both man and all of creation. We catch echoes here of the mysterious oxymoron of Augustine's *felix peccatum Adae*, for it was Adam's fault that precipitated the irruption into history of the Christ form, thus affecting the very ontological structure of man and the cosmos. Once again, all of this is startlingly evocative of Balthasar's *lumen increatum*, indwelling in man and endowing him with the analogical power of sub-creation.

Tolkien's crowning and most explicitly Incarnational argument in his apologia for fairy stories comes at the end of "On Fairy Stories," where he discusses the role of consolation, the fourth constituent element of fairy stories as a class. Tolkien makes the consolation of the happy ending a *sine qua non* of the fairy story, as true and necessary a mark of this genre as tragedy is, in his mind, of drama. Tolkien regards tragedy as the most distinctive essence of the drama, its perfecting entelechy, as it were. The fairy story's antonymous equivalent to tragedy is what Tolkien calls, in his own made-up word, eucatastrophe, drawing on the Greek adverb *eu* (meaning "well" or "good") as an approbative prefix on the analogy of words like "eulogy," "euphony," "eudaimonism," etc.

The "sudden joyous turn" which constitutes the eucatastrophe:

does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; 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.<sup>51</sup>

Eucatastrophe becomes *evangelium*, a vehicle for the ineffable mystery of redemption and immortality, suspicions of which we grasp like evanescent will-o'-the-wisps over and against the pathos of "mutabilitie," as Edmund Spenser called it in the sixteenth century. Tolkien's words here always remind me by some strange, ironical quirk, of Lucretius's mystic, lapidary lines on his master Epicurus, which might stand as a monumental epitaph to Tolkien himself:

<sup>51</sup>OFS, 81.

Ergo vivida vis animi pervicit, et extra  
Processit longe flammantia moenia mundi  
Atque omne immensum peragravit, mente animoque.  
[And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole.]<sup>52</sup>

In his Epilogue to "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien gives a further idea of what it was that moved him to broach the *flammantia moenia mundi*, to use Lucretius's splendidly orotund phrase. Tolkien graces us with a more explicit unravelling of this highly significant term *evangelium*, which shares the same prefix as eucatastrophe and, in its upper-case form, denotes, of course, the Good News that is the gospel. Tolkien evokes the incarnational dimensions of man's sub-creative faculty, while harking back to the *felix peccatum* of the fall:

It has 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.<sup>53</sup>

Tolkien hints here at a sublime argument from fittingness and proportionate design as regards the Incarnation. That God should have taken on human flesh is *to prepon* ("fitting"), to use an expression from Plato's dialectic. The Word made flesh is the exemplary coperstone and pattern of all man's making, imparting to it and all of creation a mysterious, sacramental hallowing which haunts Tolkien, the Christ-poet,<sup>54</sup> as it haunted the poet who wrote *Beowulf* and perhaps even Virgil in a tacit way. What is important to see is that there are intimations of the glory of the pre-existent Logos that cling even to the cultural productions of the pagans.<sup>55</sup> One may see limned in

<sup>52</sup>*De rerum natura*, i, 72. Translated by Cyril Bailey.

<sup>53</sup>OFS, 83

<sup>54</sup>That is, the poet of the veiled but still luminescent Christ.

<sup>55</sup>This whole fascinating subject is treated superbly in Hugo Rahner's *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. What invites further interesting speculation is the question of how modern post-Christian man may be worse off than his pagan forebears, who were often imbued with a certain natural piety and deference to the Tao (pace C.S. Lewis in *Abolition of Man*). It may be argued that modern man in his hubristic turning away from Christ is less humbly attuned to the symbolic figurations of the Logos that are inscribed into creation.

Tolkien, as in Balthasar, a profound aesthetics of the Christ form, an aesthetics that thrills to the marrow, an aesthetics that is thick with numinous, light-charged clouds of majesty and glory.

In Tolkien's scheme of things, the Gospels are the fairy story par excellence:

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. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality.' There is no tale ever told that 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.<sup>56</sup>

Tolkien's whole theory of fantastic literature may be encapsulated in this word, "gospel," which is derived from the Old English rendering of *evangelium* as *god spell*, "good story." The Old English word *spell* came also to mean, beyond its primary sense of story, "a formula or phrase of power," which is to say a magic spell. Thus the word "spell" enjoys a three-layered nexus of meanings, each one of them critical to Tolkien's conception of fantasy. A spell could be: 1) a story pure and simple; 2) a magical formula that controverts the normal phenomena of cause and effect; 3) a true story as epitomized by the gospel.

A similarly interesting philological discussion might be applied to the key word "grammar." The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) gives "gramarye," a close cognate of "grammar," the meaning "occult learning, magic, necromancy."

Thus a well-told story is akin to a magical spell in its potency, for it partakes by an *analogia entis* in the divine power of the eternal Word, which both sacralizes and transcends the mutable realm of the mundane. The casting of a magical spell is an act that reaches beyond the organic, workaday categories of cause and effect. A magical spell, however,

is in our own Christian primary world an act of impious hubris and inevitably linked to darker, hellish powers, since it truncates words from the life-giving Word and makes of them idols, self-standing counters of lordly power over nature and man. Tolkien himself has reservations about his own definition of *faërie* as magic, preferring later on in his essay "On Fairy Stories" to call it enchantment, arguing that:

Enchantment produces 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. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. . . . it is not an art but a technique: its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills.<sup>57</sup>

But we must all the same admit, *ex hypothesi*, that God may himself or through his agents suspend the normal causalities of nature. This God has actually done, most especially by the raising from the dead of his only-begotten Son and also through the miracles and marvels of his saints. But the mode of the saints is always impetratory, always redolent of humble intercession, whereas occult magic stinks of prideful gnosis.

These distinctions having been granted, it seems to me that an orthodox Christian work of romantic fantasy may posit the existence of white or benign magic in a sub-created secondary world—so long as the magic is derived, whether by direct attribution, or more allusively *ex officio*, from a divine source. Tolkien's Gandalf is, after all, a wizard, as is the fallen Saruman. But it is clear, all the same, that Tolkien is chary in his use of magic in LOTR, for he sees its manifest dangers and temptations to a will that is warped or wounded in any way, as is man's after the fall. For many Christians, this whole question of magic lingers pejoratively over Tolkien's work like a pall of irritating smoke. This is only, I think, because a great number of them see magic as a concept that is rigidly and univocally bad—which Tolkien certainly does not, pointing rather to its peculiar maleficence as a technique when it is divorced from a settled hierarchy of moral agents. Such thinking, moreover, denies the sub-creative, logocentric fecundity of man the

<sup>56</sup>OFS, 83-83.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 70-71.

maker, who in his freedom "may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation."<sup>58</sup>

Tolkien readily acknowledges that fantasy can be ill done and put to evil uses:

It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true? Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors' own evil. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their nations, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice. *Abusus non tollit usum*. Fantasy remains a human right . . .<sup>59</sup>

How thrice and quadruply true in our own day this observation about fantasy's potential for malignant, cankerwormed effusions! The fantasy sections of most bookstores are literally awash in neo-gnostic occultism, the truthful ministrations of the Incarnate Word being scarcely in evidence. Tolkien remarks that if men ever reach a state where they do not want to know or cannot know truth, fantasy will languish and perish. It will become Morbid Delusion instead, he adds, using ominously upper-case letters. It will become literally a death-ridden disembarkation from the world of play, a *de-lusio* taking over from a logocentric *in-lusio*.

All this perversion of the legitimate human good that is fantasy notwithstanding, the Christian should consider the baptism and sublimation of this genre rather than giving himself over to recriminatory invective at its expense, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As Tolkien notes gnominically, *abusus non tollit usum*. A work of fantasy inspired legitimately by orthodox Christian presuppositions can serve, through the covert logocentric structure of its symbols and the texture of its narrative typologies, to stir the moral imagination of modern man from its ursine slumbers. In this way it can act as a *praeparatio evangelica* in the same way as all the best facets of the classical myths did. Might not modern man, driven more and more to an *aporia* of meaninglessness and despair, bereft even of the dialectical tools wherewith to examine his malaise, turn to the refreshment of classic, pre-modern literary forms like

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 72.

fairy tales or medieval romances rather than to the darkling arena of discursive thought, which must seem to him to be "swept by confused alarms of struggle and flight?"<sup>60</sup> Modern man may be likened to the figure of Nicodemus, who seeks the Master under the blurred, unlimned cover of "the honey'd middle of the night."<sup>61</sup> An art like Tolkien's offers to the latter-day descendants of the surreptitious Nicodemus the powerful, chiaroscuro figure of Christ, transfigured suggestively by the poignant magic of the moon's pale rays in a shrouded landscape of night.

To G.K. Chesterton must go the credit for this metaphorical image of Nicodemus, in his introduction to the standard biography of the nineteenth century Scottish man of letters and fantasist, George MacDonald.<sup>62</sup> Lamenting the dire way in which oppressive Calvinistic orthodoxy had squashed the beauty and vividness of certain positive aesthetic passions in Scottish letters, driving these passions underground, Chesterton remarks in one of his typical displays of incisive, coruscating wit that, "as Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, the aesthete only comes to Church by moonlight."<sup>63</sup> In a sense we in the West are all heirs to Calvinist orthodoxy, inasmuch as the *rejouissance* of cultural beauty has been banished from the demesnes of industrial capitalism, which is the socio-economic avatar of dour and loveless Calvinism, anachronistic promoter of the fiercest and most twisted manifestations of a Logos-bereft Old Covenant.<sup>64</sup>

Like a colossus, Tolkien bestrides the abyss which separates the ancient and medieval worldviews from that of modern man, who has utterly lost sight of the Christ form as the primary means of access to the noumenal world. The power of the Word has been repudiated, and all around us now we see only its debased and slatternly distortions, hideous and mass-produced, like Tolkien's Orcs. Tolkien's art restores the incarnational, Christo-logical inclination of language. In middle

<sup>60</sup>From Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."

<sup>61</sup>From Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes."

<sup>62</sup>This introduction is reprinted in *The Chesterton Review*, the double issue Vol. XVII, Nos. 3 and 4 (August-November 1991): 287-91.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 291.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Sir Walter Scott's vivid portrayal of the Covenanters in his *Old Mortality*.

earth no longer do "our eyes (like those of Rilke's 'Panther' as he paces his cage) seem to be 'so tired from endlessly counting the bars.'"<sup>65</sup> The *Longaevi*<sup>66</sup> have been restored to us in all their allusive "otherness" and glory, tokens of a transfigured imagination which has broken free from the prison cage of modern literary aesthetics.

"Tolkien's creatures," explains Marion Montgomery, "through his arresting art, come to us with our shocked and delighted recognition of an old reality so long denied us. Orcs and Hobbits, Tom Bombadil and Bilbo Baggins, and Sauron the Great remind us of known but forgotten things, forgotten because Middle Earth has been sentimentalized by art and denied by pragmatic science."<sup>67</sup>

There is a short passage early on in Book I of Tolkien's trilogy that may stand as a transfixing emblem of his hallowed, elvish art. Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry have begun their fated journey and have met with the fabled fair folk, the Elves. Tolkien describes the scene, once night has fallen, in an uncanny prose that spreads a peaceful balm over heart and soul with its refulgent beauty:

Away high in the East swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt. The Elves all burst into song.<sup>68</sup>

Here in this jewel of the sub-creative craft is Christ speaking to us, through the imaginative genius of his own creature admonishing us to have no fear, telling us that he has overcome the world. □

<sup>65</sup>Balthasar, *Glory*, 29.

<sup>66</sup>In a chapter devoted to them in his *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis takes the name of the *Longaevi* or "long-livers" from Martianus Capella, "who mentions dancing companies of *Longaevi* who haunt woods, glades, and groves, lakes and springs and brooks; whose names are Pans, Fauns . . . Satyrs, Silvans, Nymphs. . . ." [quoted by Lewis in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 122].

<sup>67</sup>Marion Montgomery, *Why Hawthorne Was Melancholy*, vol. III of *The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age* (La Salle, IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1984), 395.

<sup>68</sup>*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 91.

## Christian experience in Hans Urs von Balthasar

Christophe Potworowski

Not only in mysticism, but for all  
Christians, Christian experience is the  
introduction into the experience of Christ.

In much contemporary theology, reflection stems from a prior analysis of some aspect of human experience. Thus Bernard Lonergan shows that theology must begin from a reflection on the human subject, specifically, a reflection on the cognitional operations of the knowing subject as manifested in the different levels of intentional consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

The questions I have with regard to Balthasar's view of Christian experience are prompted by a desire to confront his theological position with some of the aspirations articulated by much of North American theological literature: a concern for the integrity of human existence, the preservation of a certain incarnational structure as paradigmatic, and the privileged and ultimately normative role given to human experience. North American theological literature can be characterized by many more traits. But these belong to the dominant ones, and they will suffice for our purpose. The critical question I wish to ask thus concerns the integrity of human experience. Does Balthasar's position on Christian experience do

<sup>1</sup>See for example his essay "Theology in its New Context," in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.*, edited by William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrell (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 33-67.