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Abstract

Desire, in the form of the yearning and compelling urge to create, is the topic of this speculative but compelling reading of Tolkien's recurring "Atlantis-complex" dream, his "exorcising" of it through its use as a recurring theme in his writing, and the underlying tangle of hubris, loss, and father/son issues that might well be the source of this vision. Events in Tolkien's personal life are aligned with events in his creative life.

Additional Keywords

Winnicott, D.W. Playing and Reality; Sub-creation in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, Arthur; Tolkien, J.R.R. — "Atlantis complex"; Tolkien, J.R.R. — Biography; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Akallabeth"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Drowning of Anadûnê"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Fall of Númenor"; Tolkien, J.R.R. Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Lost Road"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Notion Club Papers"

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FROM THE INELUCTABLE WAVE TO THE REALIZATION OF IMAGINED WONDER: TOLKIEN'S TRANSFORMATION OF PSYCHIC PAIN INTO ART

JOHN ROSEGRANT

“THE PRIMAL DESIRE AT THE HEART OF [FAERIE [is] the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder” (“On Fairy-stories” [OFS] 35). With these psychologically sophisticated words, Tolkien not only named a desire, but also depicted a state of consciousness in which this desire can come to fruition. For these words capture a paradox: the desire at the heart of Faerie is to have an experience that is both subjective—*imagined* wonder—and objective—*realized independent* of the conceiving mind. Tolkien is saying that to enter Faerie, it is necessary to have one foot in subjectivity and the other foot in objectivity.

This vision of Tolkien’s bears a striking similarity to the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s description of *transitional objects* and *transitional phenomena*. For example, Winnicott stated that in addition to the internal world and the external world, “the third part of the life of a human being [...] is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate and yet interrelated” (*Playing and Reality* 2). In describing the developmental origin of the transitional object in infancy, Winnicott stated, “It comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not a hallucination” (5). And Winnicott clarifies that he is “studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion” (3).

By “transitional” experience Winnicott means experience that is transitional between the experience of Me and the experience of Not-Me. His thesis is that it is psychologically important to have the capacity for experience that is neither entirely located in external, objective reality (the Not-me), nor entirely located in internal, private reality (Me), but instead integrates or blends the Not-me and the Me. The capacity for such transitional experience is important both in early development and later life, because it helps to manage

the anxiety of being a unitary individual in a multitudinous world, and because it helps create a rich and interesting life.

Winnicott proposed that transitional experience becomes important in early development at the point when the infant begins to realize that he/she is a separate individual in a larger world. At birth, the infant does not clearly differentiate him/herself from the caretaking environment. With good-enough mothering (which nowadays we would call good-enough parenting, since the father can fulfill this role as well), the child's needs for nurturance are met in timely enough fashion that the child does not have to confront the idea that he/she is a dependent being who cannot survive without the efforts of someone external to him/her. Over time, with cognitive maturation and experience of small enough disappointments, the infant begins to recognize the difference between inner and outer realities. To tolerate and manage this difference, the child begins to create illusory experience that we can think of as neither internal nor external, or as both internal and external at the same time.

The most familiar example of such infantile illusory experience is the transitional object, such as a beloved Teddy Bear or Linus van Pelt's security blanket. Such an object is transitional between the Not-me and the Me because it is both a thing in objective reality, and a creation of the baby who has imbued it with meaning and importance. Any parent of a child with, say, a security blanket knows that while it is definitely a blanket, it is not "just a blanket." The transitional object assumes great importance for the baby because by being both their creation and separate from them at the same time, it shows that it is possible to securely integrate these realities that have been newly recognized as separate.

Typically, children lose interest in their transitional objects over time, either forgetting them completely or remembering them fondly but no longer needing them in order to feel secure. But transitional experience remains important throughout the life span, because people of all ages confront the task of both developing as separate individuals and integrating themselves into a world much larger than themselves. Winnicott thought that older children enter transitional space when they play, and that religion, art, and culture more broadly take place in adult transitional space. All of these areas of life partake of both the objective world and the subjective world, and all of them fail if they become too much objective or too much subjective. For example, "art" that is dominated by the way other people see things with no transformation by the artist would simply be an object; "art" that is dominated by the artist's vision with no connection to the world of other people would be madness. Tolkien addressed the transitionality of art in his own terms when he repudiated the concept of the willing suspension of disbelief. "...this [the willing suspension of disbelief] does not seem to me a good description of what happens. [...] [T]he

‘sub-creator’ [...] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’ [...]. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside” (OFS 52). Thus, successful storytelling requires successful integration of the storyteller’s mind with the minds of the audience. Tolkien captured both sides of this with another statement about the essence of Faërie: “Fantasy, the *making or glimpsing* of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie” (55; italics added).

With his conceptualization of transitional phenomena, Winnicott gave us a tool both to understand how people can develop to live a richly experienced life, and what happens when this development is derailed. Even the luckiest of us have times when we find it difficult to integrate inner and outer reality comfortably. The risk of not being able to imbue external reality with enough inner meaning is alienation, the experience of aloneness in a cold uncaring world; the risk of not being able to imbue inner reality with enough external meaning is madness, the insistence that the world is as one wants it to be.

As the reader will already have noticed, Winnicott used different terms to refer to different aspects of transitionality: transitional *objects*, transitional *experience*, and transitional *space*. *Transitional object* refers to what an objective observer sees as a concrete thing, although for the experiencer it has transitional qualities; *transitional experience* refers to the subjective experience of such phenomena; *transitional space* metaphorically names these phenomena as existing in a third location in addition to the more familiar external and internal worlds. Since transitional space is flexible and can develop in many directions, it is also referred to as *potential space*.

So in Winnicottian terms, Tolkien’s statement about the realization of imagined wonder means that Faerie exists in potential space. But what about Tolkien’s statement that one of the three great benefits provided by fairy stories is recovery, which he defines as “‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ —as things *apart from ourselves*” (OFS 67; italics added)? At first glance he seems to be describing something different here from his description of the primal desire at the heart of Faerie, and something opposite to transitional phenomena: a clarification of and emphasis on separateness: “We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves” (67).

In fact, though, I think that Tolkien’s concept of recovery is also a description of a transitional phenomenon, but at an adult level that shows greater differentiation and integration than the transitional object of infancy. The clear-seeing of recovery is an experience of separation and simultaneously of closeness because the separate object is loved. Let me clarify this by a look at the Valar.

From the perspective of the Valar, the creation of Arda is a beautiful example of “the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.” At the invitation of Ilúvatar, the Valar join in composing the cosmic music. When the cycles of harmony, discord, and integration are completed, the Valar behold Arda as an immaterial vision—imagined wonder. Then Ilúvatar says “Eä! Let these things Be!” (*Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 20) and Arda takes on physical form; here we have realization independent of the Valar’s conceiving minds.

Only the Elves and Men, the Children of Ilúvatar, are created with no input from the Valar, and so unlike the rest of creation, they exist for the Valar as “things apart from [them]selves.” This apartness is emphasized by the story of Aulë’s creation of the dwarves, which in Winnicottian terms we can understand as an effort to too-greatly impose internal wishes on the external world. Ilúvatar demonstrates to Aulë that the dwarves he created can have life only when Aulë is directly concentrating on giving it to them, and they can only do as he thinks; they have no independence. Then, in another moment of realization independent of the conceiving mind, Ilúvatar grants the dwarves independent life.

Aulë had created the dwarves because he couldn’t stand to wait any longer for the Firstborn; like all the “good” Valar, he was deeply and affectionately involved with the Children of Ilúvatar even before they appeared. Although they did not know in advance the time of the Firstborn’s appearance, they already considered their welfare and debated whether to alleviate Melkor’s marring of the world in preparation for their coming. Varda created brighter stars to illuminate the darkness in which they would awaken. And when Oromë finally encountered the Elves, he “was filled with wonder, as though they were beings sudden and marvellous and unforeseen; for so it shall ever be with the Valar. From without the World, though all things may be forethought in music or foreshown in vision from afar, to those who enter verily into Eä each in its time shall be met at unawares as something new and unfortold” (*Silm.* 49). This is a clear description of the sense of wonder and love that for Tolkien is a crucial aspect of seeing things “as we are meant to see them.” The Valar further show their love and care by inviting the Elves to dwell with them and be taught by them in Valinor. In fact, the Valar love the Children so much that they clothe themselves in their form (*Letters* 260).

So when Tolkien talks about “seeing things [...] as apart from ourselves” he is not implying anything like separation or alienation. Feeling separate would mean “seeing things” as only a sense perception. For Tolkien, “seeing” is seeing with love. Feeling completely separate can only happen if one does not put enough of oneself into the world.

Melkor’s relationship with the Children of Ilúvatar illustrates the opposite danger: putting too much of oneself into the world. Melkor’s desire

was to enslave, corrupt, and control Elves and Men. Although for theological reasons it was important to Tolkien to stress that Melkor (evil) could not create, but only corrupt, his corruption of Elves (and perhaps men) was powerful enough to make an entire race, the orcs. But the orcs were not truly independent of Melkor's will, or later of Sauron's, so that when the Ring was destroyed and Sauron diminished, his creatures ran about witlessly. What Melkor did with the orcs he did to an extent with the entire world, imbuing it with his evil so that all of Arda is Morgoth's Ring. In all these examples—enslaving the Children, forming the orcs, imbuing Arda with his evil—we see that a crucial aspect of Melkor's evil was that he strove to impose himself so that the Other would no longer be truly Other.

"Seeing things as apart from ourselves," then, does not mean relating to the Other on one extreme as separate and disinterested, or on another extreme by controlling it. It means relating to the Other with love of its otherness. Tolkien sums all this up in the draft of a letter dated Oct. 14, 1958: "The uncorrupted Valar, therefore, yearned for the Children before they came and loved them afterwards, as creatures 'other' than themselves, independent of them and their artistry" (*Letters* 285). In Winnicottian terms, this is relating to the Other in transitional space, where the external world and the internal world are both separate and integrated. Unlike the baby's transitional object, this is transitional space appropriate to adulthood, when separate internal and external worlds are clearly recognized.

FROZEN SYMBOLS AND THE INELUCTABLE WAVE

A hallmark of transitional experience and transitional space is the recognition that things can have multiple meanings and that different people can have different points of view; this is why Winnicott also called transitional space "potential space." The opposite of transitional/potential experiencing is to experience things as solid, unchanging facts. If one is fully invested in the external world, one disregards feeling and fantasy in favor of rational facts; if one is fully invested in the internal world, one experiences one's feelings and fantasies as themselves being rational facts.

Both internal conflict and psychic trauma produce thought and experience that feel like concrete fact in this way. Intractable conflicts center around thoughts/emotions/fantasies that are too frightening to face openly and directly, and instead manifest themselves in repetitive maladaptive symptoms or patterns of behavior. Psychic trauma can result in unchanging re-experiencing of the trauma in the repetitive failed attempt to master it (Freud, *Beyond* 16). Part of the process of resolving conflicts or healing from trauma is to move these experiences into potential space where one can discover new ways of understanding and handling them.

Winnicott's ideas apply to creativity broadly conceived—to the potential in all of us to live rich, creative lives—but they also apply to artistic creativity *per se*. In the case of artists, areas of the mind that are difficult to experience in potential space can result in blocked or unsatisfying artistic production. Even artists who are often comfortable with transitional experiencing can have times, or areas of their mind, where transitional experiencing is blocked due to internal conflict or experiences of trauma. In these areas, rather than creating symbols that have multiple meanings, they may create “frozen symbols” (Lasky 19-20) that have fact-like immutability. Such symbols only unfreeze when they can be brought into potential space and used creatively.

Tolkien's dream of the ineluctable wave was such a frozen symbol. In Tolkien's fullest descriptions of the dream he also tells how he unfroze the symbol. In a letter dated June 7, 1955 he wrote:

I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. [...] I mean the terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields. (I bequeathed it to Faramir.) I don't think I have had it since I wrote the 'Downfall of Númenor' as the last of the legends of the First and Second Age. (*Letters* 213)

In a letter dated July 16, 1964 he wrote:

What I might call my Atlantis-haunting. This legend or myth or dim memory of some ancient history has always troubled me. In sleep I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcized by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water. (*Letters* 347)

Tolkien elaborated on the meaning of “Atlantis-haunting” in a letter of Sept. 25, 1954: “the Atlantis tradition [...] seems to me so fundamental to ‘mythical history’—whether it has any kind of basis in real history [...] is not relevant—that some version of it would have to come in”; meaning come in to Tolkien's mythology (*Letters* 198).

We can glean several psychologically important meanings from these descriptions:

1. The Atlantis/Wave symbol complex was important to Tolkien from a very early age.
2. The symbol recurrently troubled his dreams, without changing.

3. The Atlantis/Wave complex symbolized Tolkien's experience of passive surrender to overwhelming impersonal force.
4. The symbol was so fundamental to him that he knew he would have to put it into his mythology.
5. Putting the symbol complex into his mythology by writing the "The Downfall of Númenor" (which henceforth I will call "The Downfall") was psychologically healing for Tolkien.

In 1955 he reported that he no longer had the dream at all. At the later date of 1964 he reported that the dream did still occasionally recur, but it was clearly less frequent and less troubling; he had "exorcised" it. Indeed, after this time the image of a great wave became flexibly available for Tolkien to use as a metaphor: In a letter from Autumn 1970 he described the house in which he was living as "contented and quiet but at the same time a bit surprised, as if it had been dumped here by a wave while asleep, and did not feel sure where it was" (*Letters* 405); and in a letter of Jan. 24, 1972, after the death of his wife, Tolkien wrote "suddenly I feel like a castaway on a barren island under a heedless sky after the loss of a great ship" (*Letters* 416).

Tolkien wrote versions of "The Downfall" in several works: "The Fall of Númenor," "The Lost Road," "The Notion Club Papers," "The Drowning of Anadûnê," "The Akallâbeth," and the Appendices to *Lord of the Rings*. Although some versions are more complete than others, all are basically consistent. Boiled down to its essence, the key elements are the following: The Valar reward a group of humans for their services against Morgoth by granting them long life and the island of Númenor to live on within sight of Eressea in the Undying Lands; the Valar forbid the Númenóreans to set foot in the Undying Lands; under the influence of Sauron, the Númenórean king hubristically invades Eressea in the vain hope of attaining immortality; Ilúvatar responds by sending a great wave that destroys their armada and sinks Númenor; prior to this calamity Elendil's father Amandil tried to sail to Valinor to prevent it but failed and was never seen again; a small group of men under the leadership of Elendil, who were faithful to the Valar, escapes to Middle-earth.

What was it about writing "The Downfall" that was psychologically healing for Tolkien? First of all, the story of "The Downfall" is much more complex than Tolkien's recurrent dream, and by thus enriching and elaborating the Atlantis/Wave symbol Tolkien was moving into transitional space where the symbol was less rigid and fact-like. Similarly, writing the dream into forms intended for an audience was a move to transitional space, where the symbol was no longer Tolkien's alone but was intended to be integrated with the larger community of minds.

Additionally, the particular ways that Tolkien elaborated on his dream show him struggling to transcend and understand his Atlantis/Wave complex. The element of a small group of Númenóreans surviving introduces hope where the dream presented only hopeless surrender. It additionally shows that the hope arises for people who live well, in the manner Tolkien intended with his descriptions of relating to the Other (discussed above).

Most importantly, Tolkien shows that hubris was the cause of “The Downfall.” On one level, this is simply good storytelling. But on another level it raises the possibility that conflict over hubris was an important unconscious meaning of Tolkien’s Atlantis/Wave complex, and therefore that “The Downfall” was psychologically healing because in the process of writing it Tolkien gained insight into his conflict over hubris. As a first step in further developing this idea, let us take a closer look at how writing “The Downfall” unfroze Tolkien’s creativity.

“THE DOWNFALL” WAS MIDWIFE TO *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

By moving his dream of the ineluctable wave into transitional space, Tolkien freed himself of an anxiety and made an important addition to the history of Middle-earth. But he also did much, much more. The dream appears to have been only the consciously visible aspect of a conflict over hubris that was inhibiting Tolkien in writing and publishing from his legendarium, in particular *The Lord of the Rings*.

In a letter of Jan. 14, 1956, Tolkien described how he got to the point that he could write *The Lord of the Rings*:

And I saw that I was *meant* to do it (as Gandalf would say), since without thought, in a ‘blurb’ I wrote for *The Hobbit*, I spoke of the time between the Elder Days and the Dominion of Men. Out of that came the ‘missing link’: the ‘Downfall of Númenor’, releasing some hidden ‘complex’.
(*Letters* 232)

If we take a close look at the history of writing “The Downfall,” we can see how Tolkien used it to release his complex: Tolkien wrote versions of “The Downfall” during periods when he was either making his legendarium public or felt blocked in doing so, which are times when we can infer that any feelings of hubris about his creation would be especially prominent for him: times of publication are when an author feels most exposed; times of creative inhibition occur when an author feels most conflicted about creating.

The table on the facing page shows the correspondences in time between Tolkien’s writing of versions of “The Downfall,” the public status of other parts of Tolkien’s legendarium (*The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*), and Tolkien’s health.

THE “DOWNFALL OF NÚMENOR” WAS MIDWIFE TO *THE LORD OF THE RINGS**

DATE	DOWNFALL	PUBLIC STATUS OF <i>HOBBIT</i> /LORD OF THE <i>RINGS</i> / <i>SILMARILLION</i>	HEALTH
1936/1937	“Fall of Númenor” written	<i>Hobbit</i> going public	
Nov. & Dec. 1937	“The Lost Road” submitted to publisher	<i>Silmarillion</i> papers also submitted; begins writing <i>LotR</i>	
Aug. 1938			Near nervous breakdown
1945-1946	“Notion Club Papers” written 12/1945-first half 1946; “Drowning of Anadûnê” written early 1946	Stuck writing <i>LotR</i> early 1945-Sept. 1946	Feb./March 1946 ill from worry; Mar.-Apr. 1946 near real nervous breakdown
Feb./Mar. 1948			Takes 3 weeks off for health at advice of doctor
Autumn 1948	Writing “Akallabeth”	Writing Appendices to <i>LotR</i>	

*Dates taken from Scull & Hammond

Scull & Hammond tell us that the first version, “The Fall of Númenor,” can be roughly dated to 1936 or possibly 1937 (2.283). This is about the time when *The Hobbit*, originally composed for private pleasure and the pleasure of Tolkien’s children, was going public: although it was not actually published until September 1937, Susan Dagnall read it in early 1936, it was submitted for publication in October 1936 and accepted that December, and Tolkien received proofs in February 1937 (2.393-395). Thus, “The Fall of Númenor” coincided with Tolkien’s first major public exposure of legendarium-related materials.

The Hobbit had rapid success and Tolkien’s publishers quickly clamored for a sequel. Tolkien submitted “The Lost Road,” the next version of “The Downfall,” in November 1937 for consideration as a possible follow-up to *The Hobbit* (Scull & Hammond 2.562), so he must have been writing it in 1937. Tolkien submitted a version of *The Silmarillion* at the same time, and actually began writing *The Lord of the Rings* in December 1937 (2.530). Thus, “The Lost Road” coincided with considerable exposure and anticipated exposure of the legendarium.

The writing of the next versions, “The Notion Club Papers” and “The Drowning of Anadûnê,” overlapped: Tolkien wrote the former between September 1945 and the first half of 1946 (Scull & Hammond 2.662), and the

latter in early 1946 (2.228). This coincided with the long hiatus from early 1945 until September 1946 during which Tolkien was stuck in writing *The Lord of the Rings*, making no progress on it. (The correspondence in time may have been even tighter: on December 18, 1944 [Letters 105], which is immediately subsequent to Tolkien's last progress on *The Lord of the Rings* until after the hiatus, he seems to refer to "The Notion Club Papers" as "my dimly projected third [novel]," although it is unclear how much thought he was putting into it at the time.) Tolkien read "The Drowning of Anadûnê" to the Inklings in August 1946, and then finally resumed writing *The Lord of the Rings* in late September (Scull & Hammond 2.538). "The Notion Club Papers" is written about a club much like the Inklings, including characters partially based on specific Inklings including Tolkien himself, and it may be that Tolkien found it particularly freeing to thus write about the ineluctable wave in a context so closely connected to himself. However this may be, Tolkien appears to have been inhibited in writing *The Lord of the Rings* by internal factors during this period, and these versions of "The Downfall" appear to have been the crucial ones for "releasing [Tolkien's] hidden 'complex'" about writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien wrote the final version of "The Downfall," "The Akallâbeth," in Autumn 1948, at the same time that he was working on the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. By this time he appears to have worked through his complex: *The Lord of the Rings* was largely complete, and the Akallâbeth was in final enough form that Christopher included it in the published *Silmarillion*.

I have included in the above table notes on Tolkien's mental and physical health during the periods in question. It is risky to make too much of the timing of Tolkien's ailments, since he was afflicted at so many occasions during his life. Nevertheless, it is worth noting in particular that during the period when *The Lord of the Rings* lay fallow and Tolkien was working on "The Notion Club Papers," he had an episode when he was "ill from worry" and another when he was "near a real nervous breakdown." These episodes are certainly consistent with the idea that Tolkien's complex behind the ineluctable wave was seriously debilitating.

Writing "The Downfall" may not have been the only time that Tolkien freed himself from a frozen symbol. Garth has argued that a similar process of transforming traumatic memory by incorporating it into his writing enabled Tolkien to overcome a block in writing *The Lord of the Rings* from December 1943 to April 1944 (see especially 309-311). World War II, and in particular the involvement of Tolkien's sons Christopher and Michael in the war, stirred up Tolkien's memories of his own war experience to an extent that inhibited his creativity. He was finally able to resume writing *The Lord of the Rings* by integrating these memories into the chapters about Frodo and Sam's approach to Mordor. Tolkien sent these chapters to Christopher as he completed them,

and this immediate sharing was likely a part of his process of shifting from isolated traumatic memory to shared transitional experience.

TOLKIEN'S CONFLICT OVER HUBRIS

The chronology demonstrates the truth of Tolkien's statement that writing "The Downfall" freed him from a complex, and indicates that the complex centered around a conflict over hubris. To further develop this idea we need additional evidence that Tolkien struggled with a sense of hubris. And indeed, Tolkien appears to have struggled mightily with a feeling that writing and publishing his legendarium and *The Lord of the Rings* was hubristic.

Tolkien's concept of sub-creation may be understood as a defense against any possibility that in his creativity he was over-reaching, as an assurance that rather than usurping any power from God the Father, he was honoring God by using skills that God had given him and emulating God's creative acts. Tolkien first wrote of sub-creation in his poem "*Mythopoiea*," the relevant lines of which he quoted in "On Fairy-stories":

Though 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). The right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made. (OFS 65)

So Tolkien's beloved Elves, Goblins, Dragons, even the Gods (Valar) that he wrote about, were not his creations but merely splinters of God's single light. Tolkien had the right to make them, because his making them was mimetic of God's making of all Creation. Tolkien made these points more prosaically in "On Fairy-stories": "Fantasy 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" (66).

Tolkien's theory of sub-creation was enormously important to him, so much so that he stated "the whole matter [his legendarium] from beginning to end is mainly concerned with the relation of Creation to making and sub-

creation" (*Letters* 188). The correct understanding of the relation of sub-creation to Creation was very important to Tolkien, and he defended it strongly in the same letter, written to Peter Hastings, a reader who thought that Tolkien had over-reached by writing about reincarnation (in the case of Elves), something that God had not already put into the world: "We differ entirely about the relation of sub-creation to Creation. I should have said that liberation 'from the channels the creator is known to have used already' is the fundamental function of 'sub-creation,' a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited" (188). Tolkien is re-asserting here that when he writes about something fantastical, he is not in conflict with God but is honoring God.

It should be clear that in positioning himself as a sub-creator Tolkien was not expressing a sense of abjection or impotence. Rather, he was declaring the relationship with God the Father in which he could comfortably work, a relationship in which no iota of hubris could be found: in no sense a challenger, in no sense creating something independently from the father-figure, but rather showing his connection to the father-figure by creating as he was created.

Although Tolkien was expressing his Catholic faith in his formulation of sub-creation, he was expressing his faith in a manner unique to him. Clearly it was not mandatory in Catholicism to come up with such a formulation or to invest it with such importance, or every Catholic would have done so already. By creating this particular expression of faith, Tolkien demonstrated the importance to him of avoiding any semblance of hubris.

Tolkien's letters contain a number of descriptions of how moments of creation felt to him. As befits his ideas about sub-creation, Tolkien often disavowed personal responsibility for what he wrote. We already saw this in the letter of January 14, 1956 (*Letters* 232), quoted above, where Tolkien said he was "meant" to write *Lord of the Rings*. Here are other examples: "It would be idle to pretend [...] that I have not a pleasure in praise, with as little vanity as fallen man can manage (he has not much more share in his writings than in his children of the body, but it is something to have a function)" (*Letters* 122); "The mere stories [...] arose in my mind as 'given' things [...] always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'" (*Letters* 145); "parts seem (to me) rather revealed through me than by me" (*Letters* 189); "I have long ceased to *invent* [...] I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself" (*Letters* 231); "[the Appendices] will be a big volume, even if I attend only to the things revealed to my limited understanding!" (*Letters* 248); and describing his response to a man who said "'Of course you don't suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?': "Pure Gandalf! [...] I think I said: 'No, I don't suppose so any longer.' I have never since been able to suppose so" (*Letters* 413). To these statements we must add Tolkien's famous claim about

how he began *The Hobbit* while grading exams: "On a blank leaf I scrawled: 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.' I did not and do not know why" (*Letters* 215), as well as his reply to G.B. Smith who had asked what Tolkien's Earendil verses were about: "I don't know. I'll try to find out" (Carpenter 75).

As the apogee of this attitude to his writing, consider Tolkien's comment in a letter of June 7, 1955: "Take the Ents, for instance. I did not consciously invent them at all. The chapter called 'Treebeard' [...] stands, with an effect on myself (except for labour pains) almost like reading some one else's work. And I like Ents now because they do not seem to have anything to do with me" (*Letters* 211-212). Here Tolkien not only disavows responsibility for creating Ents, but expresses his pleasure in "seeing [them] as things apart from [him]self." This is a beautiful example of transitional experiencing, where "the making *or* glimpsing of Other-worlds" becomes the making *and* glimpsing of Other-worlds.

All the above passages are descriptions of artistic inspiration—literally "being breathed into" with the implication that all the artist is doing is setting forth something that was put into him; Tolkien's metaphor of giving birth in the last passage is a direct expression of this (and I borrowed the metaphor for the title of the above Table). In many religions, inspiration is understood as coming from the gods; in Christianity, inspiration comes from the Holy Spirit. Tolkien's repeated descriptions of inspiration are thus congruent with his concept of sub-creation. One of the psychological functions of experiencing one's creations as inspired is to protect oneself from the terrors of claiming the work as one's own. And despite Tolkien's efforts to position himself without hubris, he knew these terrors: After receiving qualified appreciation of *The Silmarillion* from Stanley Unwin, Tolkien wrote, "I have suffered a sense of fear and bereavement, quite ridiculous, since I let this private and beloved nonsense out; and I think if it had seemed to you to be nonsense I should have felt really crushed" (*Letters* 26); and shortly before publication of *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote, "I am dreading the publication, for it will be impossible not to mind what is said. I have exposed my heart to be shot at" (*Letters* 172).

Heretofore I have been demonstrating one side of Tolkien's conflict over hubris: his defense against hubris with his theory of sub-creation and his experience of inspiration. Tolkien also showed us the other side of this conflict, open hubris and its consequences, which he described in the letter to Waldman in late 1951: "sub-creative desire [...] may become possessive, clinging to the things made as 'its own', the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator" (*Letters* 145). Tolkien of course illustrated this in the character of Melkor, but the character who really brings it alive, because we know him before he is overcome with hubris, and we see the moments that hubris overtakes him, is Fëanor.

Fëanor was “of all the Noldor [...] the most subtle of mind and the most skilled in hand” (*Silm.* 64). His mother was so exhausted by giving him birth that her spirit left her body and, most unusually, chose not to return. His father, Finwë, later remarries; curiously, *The Silmarillion* does not speak of Fëanor’s grief about losing his mother, but emphasizes his displeasure at his father for remarrying, and it is the latter that other observers focused on: “In those unhappy things which later came to pass, and in which Fëanor was the leader, many saw the effect of this breach within the house of Finwë” (65). This emphasis on Fëanor’s emotional rebellion against his father serves to draw our attention to it as a sign of his developing hubris.

Fëanor’s skill was such that he devised an improved writing system, learned how to make gems more beautiful than those naturally occurring, and eventually, of course, created the Silmarils that preserved the light of the Two Trees. After creating them Fëanor fell in love with them: “The heart of Fëanor was fast bound to these things that he himself had made” (*Silm.* 67). With the emphasis provided by “he himself,” Tolkien makes sure we notice that now Fëanor’s pride and hubris begin to overmatch him. Soon “Fëanor began to love the Silmarils with a greedy love [...] he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own” (69).

When Melkor and Ungoliant destroy the Two Trees, Yavanna pleads that it is beyond her power to remake them, but that with their light from the Silmarils she could recall them to life. Fëanor responds that he could never again make the like of the Silmarils, “and if I must break them, I shall break my heart, and I shall be slain [...]. This thing I will not do of free will” (78-79). It is then discovered that Melkor and Ungoliant have already stolen the Silmarils, slaying Finwë in the process. The narrator states that therefore “all one it may seem whether Fëanor had said yea or nay to Yavanna; yet had he said yea at the first [...] it may be that his after deeds would have been other than they were” (79). His after deeds were, of course, the oath that he and his sons took “to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf or Man [...] whoso should [...] keep a Silmaril from their possession” (83), as well as the entire resulting tragedy of the Elves. By swearing their oath, Fëanor and his sons lock themselves into a repetitive, unchangeable pattern of conflict. They have destroyed potential space.

So it is not Melkor’s killing of the Two Trees and theft of the Silmarils that causes disaster; rather, disaster results from Fëanor’s response, his pride and hubris. Could Tolkien have asserted any more strongly the dangers of artistic hubris than by thus placing it at the core of his legendarium?

HUBRIS AND THE FATHER

I have already hinted above that Tolkien's conflict over hubris was linked to father-figures: his concept of sub-creation was an effort to position his creativity properly vis-a-vis the creativity of God the Father, and a first sign of Fëanor's hubris was his emotional rebellion against his father for remarrying. What about Tolkien's relationship with his actual father?

Tolkien dated his dream of the ineluctable wave to the earliest days he can remember, suggesting that a childhood experience of hubris was already part of his personality. Because we only have fragmentary information about Tolkien's early childhood, what follows is necessarily tentative; however, both biographical and textual data are consistent with the idea that the young Tolkien had anxieties about over-reaching, linked to the death of his father.

Tolkien's earliest memories date to late in his third and early in his fourth year, about the age when he experienced the first of a series of dramatic traumas: separation from his father and his father's subsequent death before they ever saw each other again. For my purposes what is important about these memories is not their historical, factual truth, but what they tell us about Tolkien's emotional life. Like many people's earliest memories, Tolkien's record seemingly trivial events; such memories appear to be retained because they symbolize emotionally significant life themes (Freud, *Screen*). Memory is malleable and can be affected by suggestion (Loftus). Therefore, although we do not know if Tolkien's earliest recorded memories represent historical truth, and we do not know if they became important to him at the ages he remembers, it is reasonable to assume that they represent emotionally significant themes from his early life.

Tolkien's earliest memories that we know of include two where the exact date is uncertain: he remembered running in fear through long dead grass after a tarantula bit him, although he did not remember the tarantula (Carpenter 13); and he remembered being horrified to see an archdeacon eat corn in native fashion (Grotta 19). He ascribed a memory of bathing in the Indian Ocean to his second year, although memories from such an early age are rare and are likely to be misdated or partly constructed later in life. Tolkien's earliest memories that can be dated with certainty come from late in his third year. He had a faint memory of a long train journey in November 1894, and of running back from the sea to a bathing hut (Carpenter 15). He recalled a clearer image from Christmas 1894: "My first Christmas memory is of blazing sun, drawn curtains, and a drooping eucalyptus" (*Letters* 213). His other earliest memories are from just before and during his trip to England, when he was a young four-year-old: in late March or early April 1895 he watched his father paint "A.R. Tolkien" on the lid of a cabin trunk (Scull & Hammond 1.3), and from the voyage itself that same April he remembered dark people diving into the water to collect coins

thrown from the ship, and a city on a hill which later in life he realized must have been Lisbon (*Tolkien Family Album* 18).

Several emotionally significant things are notable about these memories: First, none of them involve direct interaction with people; this suggests that already at an early age Tolkien was prone to feelings of aloneness/loneliness/loss. Second, the only person important in Tolkien's life to appear in these memories was his father; and third, the memories of his father and of the voyage all concern the time of separation from his father. This cluster of memories indicates that Tolkien's loss of his father was a major organizer of his emotions. Finally, we may wonder if memory of the sea voyage that carried Tolkien away from his father is one of the roots of his dream of the ineluctable wave.

Textual evidence indicates that "The Downfall" was in part a working-through of Tolkien's feelings about his father. In the basic elements of the story we see four father figures: The King of Númenor, the father of his people, who in the wish to avoid death commits an act of fatal hubris; Ilúvatar, God the Father, who punishes this hubris; Elendil, the father of the subsequent line of Númenórean royalty on Middle-earth, who is allowed to escape; and Amandil, Elendil's father, who out of good motives also commits an act of hubris and is lost. Taken together, these elements represent a complex of feelings linking father, death, and punishment for hubris.

Additionally, one version of "The Downfall," "The Lost Road," was primarily a work about father-son relationships. As Tolkien described it, "the thread was to be the occurrence time and again in human families [...] of a father and son called by names that could be interpreted as Bliss-friend and Elf-friend" (*Letters* 347). The autobiographical relevance of the story is overt, as has been noted by Christopher Tolkien (*Lost Road* 57) and Scull & Hammond: Alboin, the son in the first pair, has language interests, school career, and professional interests very like Tolkien's.

Right away in Tolkien's proposed thread we notice an indefinite quality to these characters: each father-son pair was to merge with each in name and motivation, rather than being whole clearly defined individuals. This merging is especially noticeable between the first son, after he grows up, and his own son. Their names are even hard to distinguish visually and phonetically: Alboin and Audoin. They have similar experiences hinting at the downfall of Númenor. And tellingly, they have these experiences while dreaming. Eventually, Alboin has a dream-come-true in which he encounters the Númenórean Elendil who gives him the choice whether to travel back in time or not. Alboin chooses to travel back and in doing so becomes Elendil, while Audoin becomes Elendil's son Herendil. Thus, Alboin's dream seems to change

both him and his son in reality. All these features are consistent with a largely nonverbal wish to return to an earlier time with his idealized, lost father.

To repeat, these inferences about early childhood are tentative. However, Tolkien's biography, his earliest reported memories, and textual evidence from "The Downfall" all converge in indicating that Tolkien responded to separation from his father when he was three and to his father's subsequent death when he was four by developing anxiety about over-reaching.

We can speculate about the more precise form of Tolkien's reaction to his father's death by considering typical developmental issues for children around the age Tolkien was at that time. Erikson (251-258) considered this to be the stages when development of autonomy and initiative are central; a boy's loss of his father at this age deprives him of a strong figure with whom to identify and can thus interfere with his sense of autonomy and initiative. The transition from the third to the fourth year is also typically when the child is in the early Oedipal phase, when cognitive and emotional maturation are such that children begin to feel rivalrous with each parent for the love of the other. If a boy's father dies at this age, the boy may experience himself to be an "Oedipal victor" who has the mother all to himself. It is common for young children to unrealistically blame themselves for calamities that befall them, so such an Oedipal victor may feel guilty, as though his rivalrous feelings had caused the father's death. Along these lines, we may speculate that Tolkien responded to the death of his father by developing inhibition, shame, and/or guilt about appropriate feelings of rivalry, competition, autonomy, and initiative, and that this conflict was the origin of his complex around hubris.

Of course, we do not have Tolkien's own associations to confirm or disprove this reconstruction. But even if we set it aside as too speculative, Tolkien's "associations" in the form of his memories and writings do support the interpretation that his complex around hubris was focused on worries about over-reaching in relation to father-figures more generally. Writing "The Downfall" released his complex because it enabled Tolkien to play in transitional space with his concerns that hubris would be punished by father-figures, and lack of hubris rewarded.

CONCLUSION

In his elucidation of the psychological foundations of Faerie, Tolkien described the process of entering what Winnicott named *transitional space*, the foundation of creative living in general, and artistic creativity specifically. The opposite of transitional space—and therefore the opposite of Faerie—is a space of concrete, material fact. Intrapsychic conflict and/or experiences of trauma situate a person in this kind of factual space where creative living and artistic creativity cannot occur. Tolkien's dream of the ineluctable wave appears to have

symbolized an intrapsychic conflict over hubris that he developed in response to the trauma of his father's death, such that he unconsciously inhibited his creativity so as not to threaten his relationship with father-figures. By writing "The Downfall" Tolkien "exorcised" the dream so that it no longer troubled him, and more importantly "released [the] hidden complex" so that he could complete *The Lord of the Rings*.

In Tolkien's justification of "Escape" as one of the main benefits of fairy-stories (OFS 69-75), he focuses on the value of escaping from unpleasant material realities of the modern world. This has left him open to charges of anachronism and avoidance of modern realities. But I think these charges are invalidated, and Tolkien's concept of Escape made more profound, if we see it as a metaphor for "escaping" a concrete, material state of mind—in other words, for finding or re-finding transitional space. Tolkien went through this process in his own artistic creation, and all of his *oeuvre* that is set in Faerie or at its boundaries draws his readers into this process. Perhaps part of his appeal is that he helps people move from their own ineluctable waves to the realization of imagined wonder.

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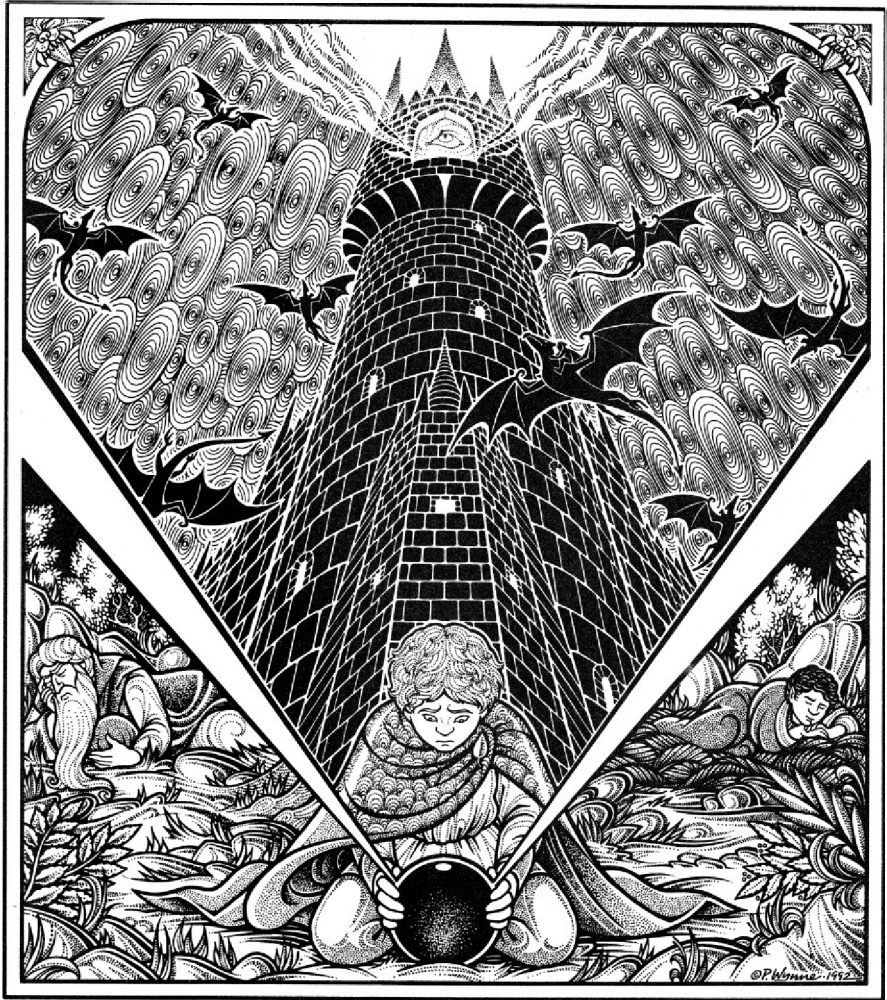


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