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The Fantastic Sublime: Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories' and the Romantic Sublime

Abstract

Discusses Romantic views of the sublime as they relate to Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories." Distinguishes the Gothic ("the literature of fear") from fairy-stories and most children's fantasy ("the literature of joy").

Additional Keywords

Children's fantasy; Fairy tales; Romanticism; Sublime in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

The Fantastic Sublime

Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" and the Romantic Sublime

DAVID SANDNER

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien defines fairy stories not by the presence of fairies, but rather the presence of *Faerie*, of another world, unreachable within the text itself:

The definition of a fairy-story — what it is, or what it should be — does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faerie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. I will not attempt to define that, nor describe it directly. It cannot be done. *Faerie* cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. (114)

Tolkien speaks of fantasy as a wind that blows from beyond the world, a typical Romantic metaphor for describing an overflow of feeling moving through the soul (Abrams, 26) and for the unseen presence of the world of the spirit. Fantasy itself cannot reveal this other world; it can only bring the reader to the moment of perception before apprehension of it, that is, to the moment of the expression of its quality of being "indescribable, though not imperceptible." Fantasy can bring the reader right to the edge of the primeval forest that is so often the border of fairyland in fairy tales. But the reader must step inside alone.

In Romanticism, the apprehension of the world of the spirit in nature has been called the "natural sublime" In the sublime moment, the contemplation of a natural object leads to an aesthetic rapture, which produces a correspondent overflow of feeling, revealing the transcendent. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth describes

a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused....
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
and rolls through all things" (95-102).

Coleridge calls it the experience of "the one Life within us and abroad,/ Which meets all emotion and becomes its soul" ("Eolian Harp," 26-7), the great movement of something, not the self, which exists without and within, sweeping the self away in a unity of this world and the world of the spirit.

Coleridge presents as an example of the sublime "A Mountain in a cloudless sky, its summit hidden by clouds and seemingly blended with the sky, while mists and floating vapors encompass it, is sublime" (Shawcross, 342). For Coleridge, a natural object, to engender the sublime, must have an incomplete quality that paradoxically leads the mind to seek for more, It must be suggestive of

infinity. The critic Raimonda Modiano writes:

for Coleridge the essential qualities which occasion the sublime are boundlessness and indefiniteness, Yet Coleridge's emphasis is not so much on infinite extension as on the quality of perceptual indistinctness which allows certain objects to lose their individual form and blend with one another into a whole, though not one that can be grasped fully. (115)

The hidden mountain blending with the sky implies more than mountain and sky, a completeness and wholeness beyond the world. It implies the consubstantial world, the one life of the spirit. For Coleridge, "the lack of distinct boundaries and spatial specificity serves as the means of conveying to the mind an impression of unity" (115). Where the mountain uncovered would be merely "Grand" or "Majestic," the hidden summit is "Sublime" (Modiano, 114).

Wordsworth describes the natural sublime as "dwelling in the light of setting suns,/ And the round ocean and the Living air,/ And the blue sky, and in the mind of man" ("Tintern Abbey," 97-9). The setting sun, half-faded into night, the round ocean, disappearing over the horizon, the living air, the wind blowing from beyond the world, are Romantic images of loss, of what cannot be fully known. No natural object in itself is sublime. The mind, suddenly free from the phenomenal through indefiniteness and suggestiveness, experiences the sublime, The sublime is centered in subject not object, in a dissolution into unity that reveals an absolute essence — to the mind.

In his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" the nineteenth-century fantasist George MacDonald describes the effect of fantasy literature with images recalling Coleridge's misty mountaintop and Wordsworth's setting sun: "A fairytale, a sonata, a gathering storm, a limitless night, seizes you and sweeps you away" (319). In both Romantic poetry and fantastic literature, the imagination reaches beyond its grasp in a movement towards transcendence.

In his book, *The Romantic Sublime*, the critic Thomas Weiskel describes the structure of the sublime as divided into three stages. In the first phase, the mind is in a determinate, habitual relationship with the contemplated object. In the second phase, in an overflow of feeling, the habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down. Surprise and astonishment is the affective correlative, and there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer. Either mind or object is suddenly in excess, and then both are since their relation has become radically indeterminate. In the third, or reactive, phase of the

sublime moment, the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind's relation to a transcendent order. (23-4)

The second phase is experienced as the tearing of a veil between this world and another field of experience altogether, one both more immediate and more intense. Paradoxically, the transcendence of the sublime, although centered in the subject, requires, in order to reach through the veil to the moment of unity, a self, effacement, a loss of the self.

This loss, which might be regarded as a kind of freeing of the self, is expressed in Romanticism through two distinct kinds of forgetfulness, or rather, two distinct states of being—the world and the world of spirit—each requiring one to forget about the other state. First, an a priori, or in-born, forgetfulness of the world of the spirit out of which one came into existence, makes the experience of the second phase of the sublime a revelation of sudden remembrance, the dropping of an amnesia, the return of something lost. In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Wordsworth writes: "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting," but he describes something that yet abides, some trace memory: "Not in entire forgetfulness,/ And not in utter nakedness,/ But trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home" (58-65).

The trace memory of glory, strongest in unselfconscious childhood, leads to a longing for the lost world of the spirit and, ironically, in the very movement toward spirit, to the second kind of forgetfulness. In the second kind of forgetfulness expressed in Romanticism, the forgetfulness of the sublime moment, we must forget what we have become in this world in order to remember the glory of our once and future home in spirit. Wordsworth dramatizes the transcendence of self in *The Prelude* as "spots of time" (12: 208), indeterminate moments when time and place and person loosen their hold on the individual in epiphanies of childhood imaginative experience.

For Wordsworth and Coleridge, self-forgetfulness is also important in children's fantasy. In order to move toward the spirit, the narrow confines of the self must be left behind in flights of imagination and fantasy. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth writes:

Oh! give us once again the wishing cap
Of Fortunatus, and the invisible coat
Of Jack the Giant-killer, Robin Hood
And Sabra in the forest of St. George!
The child whose love is here, at least, doth reap
One precious gain, that he forget himself, (5: 341-6)

Coleridge, in a defense of fairy and adventure tales, writes of children's fantasy literature:

Nothing should be more impressed on parents and tutors than to make children forget themselves; and books which only told how Master Billy and Miss Ann spoke and acted were not only ridiculous but extremely harmful. Much better

to give them "Jack-the-Giant-Killer" or the "Seven Champions" or anything, which being their sphere of action, should not feed self-pride. (*Shakespearean Criticism*, 2: 292)

For Wordsworth and Coleridge, realistic children's stories only serve to make children acutely self-conscious and prideful. It is better to release them into fairy tales and the imagination, into dreams of other worlds, and closer to the remembrance of the glory of the world of the spirit.

The critic Northrop Frye discusses self-forgetfulness in fantasy literature in general:

Whether romance begins with a hero whose birth is, as Wordsworth says, a sleep and a forgetting, or whether it begins with a sinking from a waking world into a dream world, it is logical for it to begin its series of adventures with some kind of break in consciousness, one which often involves actual forgetfulness of the previous state. We may call this the motif of amnesia. (102)

The loss of self is not without dangers, however. Frye describes fantasy's "break in consciousness," such as "wandering into the land of fairies," as "involving a change so drastic as to give the sense of becoming someone else altogether" (103). Frye states: "the structural core [of fantasy] is the individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity" (104). Fantasy can occasion an intense, frightening breakdown of identity, a breakdown that leads to another world, the world of dreams and imagination, and of spirit.

This breakdown is characteristic of the second phase of the sublime moment. While necessary to the recovery of the third phase, it also holds real danger, sometimes called the "blockage of the sublime" Weiskel describes "an abridgment of the sublime moment so that we are confined to the second phase and await futilely the restorative reaction which never comes, except ironically" (26). In this abridgment of the sublime, the tearing of the veil becomes an endless tearing, an opening without end or release, where the third or restorative phase never comes. The critic David B. Morris describes the sublime as:

an experience in which words and images grow radically unstable, where meaning is continually in question, approaching or receding or fixed on a distant horizon, promising new dimensions of insight or (in abrupt absences) unexpectedly blocking the mind. (299)

The critic Neil Hertz put forward Wordsworth's Simplon Pass episode and the encounter with the Blind Beggar from *The Prelude* as examples of the blockage of the sublime (44). In each example, Wordsworth is lost and confused and his visionary moment ends not in transcendence but in letdown and disappointment. The sublime moment risks the subject's sense of identity in a bewildering moment of uncertainty that may lead only to more bafflement.

In Sigmund Freud's paper on the fantastic, "The Uncanny" (1919), which Harold Bloom calls "Freud's theory of the sublime" (218). Freud describes a kind of blockage in fantasy literature as taking part in the confusion of the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, "canny" and "un-

canny," which through common usage merge and come to mean their opposites (377). In this move, the supernatural is found to be the natural, the other is distressingly discovered to be the self, that is, the *unheimlich* is *heimlich*. This ownership proves claustrophobic, for what comes hidden in the guise of the fantastic turns out to be the inferior term in the self's production of itself, the repressed unconscious (389-94). Morris writes:

For Freud, the uncanny derives its terror not from something external, alien or unknown but — on the contrary — from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it. ("Gothic Sublimity," 307)

In the uncanny moment, the radical otherness of fantasy is experienced as a challenge to one's construction of reality and a subversion of one's understanding of self.

In fantasy literature, the blockage of the sublime marks the Gothic, what Freud calls the "uncanny," the literature of fear. The transcendent sublime, where the second phase gives way to the third, bringing release and restoration, marks what Tolkien calls fairy-stories and describes much children's fantasy literature, what might be called the "literature of joy." Gothic literature fragments and collapses, as in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840), Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) or Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* (1891). Fairy-stories, often presided over by the Romantic divine child, move outward on a visionary journey and return, on a quest toward the transcendent and spiritual. However, the risk of blockage, of the confusion of identity, of feelings of loss and abandonment, plays an important role in fairy stories as a necessary precursor to a sudden release.

Through the psychological breakdown of the uncanny, fantasy takes part in the overwhelming of the senses by the sublime, the rush of feeling leading to self-effacement where the self and not-self are suddenly out of balance. In fairy stories, unlike the Gothic, this leads to the next step of the sublime: the apprehension and awe of the oneness of everything. In fairy stories, as in the natural sublime, the breakdown of the imagination becomes less a failure than a method for the self to loosen itself, through crisis, from the constraints of reason, consciousness, society — whatever is known, defined, explained.

According to Tolkien in his landmark essay "On Fairy-Stories," fantasy literature, through the action of "arresting strangeness" (156), offers three distinct gifts: Recovery, Escape and Consolation. These three gifts have a kinship to the three phases of the sublime moment.

In Recovery, as the critic Jack Zipes observes, "The placing of objects from our everyday world in a luminous, estranged setting compels us to perceive them in a new way" (*Breaking*, 143). Tolkien carefully explains that he would not describe Recovery as revealing things in essence or truth, only claiming that he might call it "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them," freed from "familiarity, from possessiveness" (165). Recovery is the


tearing of the veil between worlds, an apprehension of the otherness of things, the movement into the second phase of the sublime. The self-effacement of the sublime, the leaving behind of the cares of this world, is evident in the shedding of possessiveness,

Escape also provides a loosening of the constraints of the world characteristic of the self-effacement of the second phase of the sublime moment. Tolkien does not mean Escape in a negative sense, writing that it might be "practical," or even "heroic" (173), as it strives to leave behind all the cares and sorrows of the world in pursuit of the gift of Consolation, the joy and restoration of the third phase of the sublime.

Finally, Consolation is the release and transcendence of fairy stories, which in one of its aspects, the happy ending, Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe." In "On Fairy-Stories," he defines eucatastrophe as:

a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It 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. (153)

Tolkien's Consolation is the fantastic sublime, drawn from the Romantic tradition of the natural sublime, both extending and revising it.

This kind of fantastic literature, Tolkien's fairy story, is a transformational literature, focused, like Romanticism, on the individual, on the spiritual, on the imagination. The fantastic sublime must move the reader to glimpse beyond the printed page, because the sublime does not lie in the text at all, but reveals, beyond it, Joy, with a capital J. The fantastic sublime, like the natural sublime, requires a visionary to arouse wonder and desire, fear of loss of identity and a sudden rising above "poignant as grief." Only a certain kind of reader, bringing longing and a shaping spirit of imagination, will find the sublime in the fantastic text at all. In fantasy literature, the reader is invited, perhaps tricked by Will o' Wisps, into the primeval forest. As the simple power of the fairy tale narrative proves, no seeker comes into the forests of Faerie without wanting, without needing to come there. And nobody returns unchanged. 

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EDITORIAL, continued from page 3

many compliments from both new comers and those who are there every year. That said, I can relax from a labor that I undertook, not for "power and glory," but because the Society was in *need*. I do not foresee repeating the honor of Chairing another Conference for the foreseeable future. Unforseen delays after the conference included my daughter's wedding, other urgent family matters, and yet more problems in my complex, this time involving unreliable contractors.

The fear that caused the cold spot in my stomach a year ago has come back. Some people who were agreeing that it was Southern California's turn last year, and that it was the Stewards in the region who needed to take responsibility, have criticized *Mythlore* for not appearing on schedule. I do feel disheartened about this. In some eyes I am "damned" no matter what happens.

Even so, what about bruised tailbones and viruses delaying the *Mythlore* production process? On this there are four things: 1. To take stress off the furniture, I have lost about 35 pounds of fat and gained about 15 pounds of muscle. 2. My health has dramatically improved — I feel younger and stronger — and I seem to fight off allergies and viruses much better. 3. Our Submissions Editor has agreed to provide greater textual preparation in the form of scanning submissions that are not directly available on disk. This will save a great deal of my time in formatting issues. 4. The finding of a new Associate Editor, to help keep production moving (see page 53).

The future looks very good right now. We have a number of excellent submissions, that will create a good "mix" for a number of issues.

There is another issue that should be shared, because I personally very much want to hear what *you* think. Upon it being suggested by various others, *Mythlore* a number of years ago implemented its program of becoming a juried or refereed journal (the two terms mean basically the same thing). Under this system papers are reviewed by members of the Editorial Advisors before publication. This gives the publication more academic prestige, and does help some paper writers gain tenure if their work is printed in a juried journal.

If we had a paid staff subsidized by a university to handle the considerable correspondence this entails, the work would be much easier. We are a staff of volunteers, who have other professional duties to carry out first. The

juried process can be "correspondence intensive." In the past, each paper needed to be reviewed by three editorial advisors before publication. The problem arose when all three evaluations did not come back in the time frame needed to put together a given issue. Either we had to make last minute changes in the issues contents, or publish the paper before all the evaluations were in. Matters worsened when the former submissions editor became heavily involved with family-related issues, and the process became increasingly bogged down.

With all the concern raised the last few years about the frequency of the issues, delaying an issue for this reason has not seemed like a justifiable reason. As a result, not all the papers published have gone through the full three panel jury system. How does this effect you? Not a great deal to most people, I surmise, since most of the papers that go through this process are printed as originally written.

I have had extensive discussions with our new Submissions Editor, who has suggested "streamlining the process" by sending the papers to two editorial advisors, besides being reviewed by the Submissions Editor and myself.

My primary concern is serving the ongoing readers of *Mythlore*; this takes precedence over possibly helping a non-subscribing papers submitter obtain tenure (most papers submitters do not have this problem). For those that are going through this difficult process of seeking tenure, I give my full sympathy and sensitivity.

I would very much like to know *what do you think?* Is continuing the juried process meaningful to you? Is the extra work necessary for the improvement of the journal?

A related note: submissions do not come in a regular flow. There are dry periods and times when many good things come in together. More than half of all papers printed in *Mythlore* are first given at a Mythopoeic Conference. This organic link between *Mythlore* and the Conferences cannot be overlooked or minimized.

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