



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 21  
Number 2

Article 15

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Winter 10-15-1996

## Tolkien's Revision of the Romantic Tradition

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### Recommended Citation

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Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/15>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

This paper explores Tolkien's vision of fantasy within the broader historical context of Romanticism, clarifying the ways in which he inherits and revises Romantic views of the creative imagination via the concept of "sub-creation". Possible links with Coleridge's thought are considered, especially with respect to the uses of Romanticism in the context of Christianity.

### Additional Keywords

Owen Barfield; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; creative imagination; fantasy; imagination; Romantic thought

# Tolkien's Revision of the Romantic Tradition

Chris Seeman

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## Introduction

In the continuing debate over the genre of Tolkien's writings, the appreciation of his life and work as a whole, and his relationship to the other Inklings, the term "Romanticism" has enjoyed some currency. In characterizing Tolkien in this way, recourse has often been made to the now well-trodden essay "On Fairy-Stories". The invocation of such concepts as *sub-creation*, *secondary belief*, and *eucatastrophe* have inevitably led to comparisons of Tolkien's views on artistic creation with the traditional conventions of Romantic thought; in particular, with those of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But while a handful of commentators have explored these connections in some depth, as yet no one (to my knowledge) has advanced a clear or convincing analysis of Tolkien's place within the Romantic tradition. No one, for example, has addressed in a straightforward manner the question of whether Tolkien has made any significant contribution to Romantic thought, or if his views are merely idiosyncratic. Many have carefully taken note of Tolkien's apparent disagreements with Coleridge, but few (it seems) have given much thought to what those discrepancies might mean as part of a larger picture.

My purpose here is to explore the use of Romanticism as a way of characterizing Tolkien's self-understanding in the context of Romanticism. Specifically, I want to examine more closely his relationship to Coleridge's views in order to clarify what makes Tolkien's understanding of fantasy distinctive within the tradition of Romantic thought. Central to my evaluation is the conclusion that sub-creation (surely Tolkien's most celebrated expression) is *not*, in fact, the most crucial facet of his theory of the fairy story. Instead, what emerges as the most distinctive feature of his aesthetic is the *restriction* of sub-creation to the narrative mode, and the exclusion of the visual as a vehicle of authentic fantasy. My

argument, simply put, is that Tolkien's seemingly minor disputes with Coleridge in reality form the necessary basis for his claim that drama – and indeed all visual modes of art – are essentially hostile to fantasy (Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 47-48).

The absoluteness of Tolkien's position demands explanation – not only in its own right but because, unlike the concept of sub-creation itself (which enjoys a central place in Romantic thought), its restriction to narrative stands out as an anomaly<sup>1</sup>. I offer that Tolkien is being neither facetious nor idiosyncratic in his rejection of these artistic modes. Accordingly, the logic of this rejection is to be deduced from the differing concerns which narrative and the visual signify for him. To summarize briefly my argument, Tolkien revises the Romantic tradition by asserting the validity of fantasy as a distinct mode of art. He differentiates fantasy from other art forms by restricting it to narrative, thereby highlighting its non-visual or non-representational character. For Tolkien, non-visual art implies:

- 1) a particular relationship between the artist and the hearer, which demands an active use of the imagination from the latter,
- 2) an ambivalence within the human desire to realize fantasy in the primary world, hindered by the Fall but anticipating the *evangelium*, and
- 3) the ongoing role of humanity as sub-creator, embodied in the continual recovery of authentic vision through fantasy.

Ultimately, this will lead us beyond the Romantic tradition to Tolkien's deeply-held religious convictions. In the last analysis, it is the contours of Tolkien's theology which account for the shape of his Romanticism. None of this should be surprising to anyone acquainted with Tolkien's writings, but for the most part this understanding has been applied only to the more obvious aspects of "On Fairy-

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<sup>1</sup> Since its beginnings in the eighteenth-century, Romanticism has freely included both the dramatic and the visual within its aesthetic canon. For examples of this, see Engell, 1981.

Stories"; and since these suggest continuity with the tenets of Romantic thought, they tend to neglect this crucial revision.

### Tolkien, Coleridge, and the Romantic Tradition

Attempts to identify possible Romantic links to Tolkien's thought have focused either upon the essay or upon his relationships with the other Inklings; in particular, with Owen Barfield. This latter possibility has most recently been advocated by Gareth Knight, whose introduction to the writings of the Inklings posits Barfield as a common denominator connecting the work of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams to a more or less explicit Coleridgean hermeneutic:

It is in the psychological and philosophical thought of Coleridge, on the subject of the imagination, that the secret of the power of the creative work of the other Inklings is to be found . . . This was less a conscious following after Coleridge than a deliberate choice to cultivate the "mythopoeic" in their writing . . . Their common purpose had its roots in a unity of spiritual intention or compatibility . . . Barfield, through his intellectual influence, both orally and as expressed in *Poetic Diction* provided an intellectual stimulus to much of this.

(Knight, 1990, pp. 10, 11, 13-14)

In his analysis of the nature and extent of the Inklings' association, Humphrey Carpenter has made reference to *Poetic Diction* as expressive of Barfield's views on language, and confirms that Tolkien had indeed read and approved of the book (Carpenter, 1979, p. 42). Carpenter is quick to remind us, however, of the major differences in Tolkien and Barfield's religious outlooks and how those differences do have a significant impact on their respective understandings of myth (Carpenter, 1979, pp. 153-157). The mere fact of Barfield's discipleship to Coleridge may, therefore, not be sufficient warrant for Knight's view of Barfield as the principal mediator of the Romantic tradition to Tolkien. As an heuristic convenience, Coleridge's thought may be a useful lens for highlighting and accounting for some of the commonalities of the Inklings as a group; but his views can neither explain – nor explain away – the differences in the self-understandings of Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Barfield. Nor does the invocation of Coleridge alone provide an adequate framework for assessing the relative significance of those differences.<sup>2</sup>

There are no explicit references to Coleridge by name in "On Fairy-Stories".<sup>3</sup> Commentators on the essay have pointed out at least two passages where they believe Tolkien to have been consciously engaging Coleridge's views:

1) Tolkien's objection to the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief"<sup>4</sup> as an accurate description of the subjectivity

induced by an effective narrative (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 36), and 2) Tolkien's redefinition of "fantasy" in relation to what he calls the technical use of the term "imagination" (Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 44ff). What follows is a brief survey of the remarks and observations which have been made on these possible connections to Coleridge's thought.

Considering Tolkien's substitution of his own expression "secondary belief" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 37) for Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief, Randel Helms (1974, pp. 11, 77-78), Frank Bergmann (1977, p. 13), and Henry Parks (1981, p. 142) argue that Tolkien is here strengthening Coleridge's words by giving them an affirmative rather than a negative sense, or by shifting attention from the passive acceptance of the reader to the active role of the author. Ann Swinfen concurs with this view (Swinfen, 1984, p. 7), but suggests that it points to a much deeper philosophical gap between the two writers:

Coleridge evolved his theory of imagination in reaction to the associationist theories of Locke and Hartley, but despite his reading of neo-Platonists like Cudworth or such earlier writers as Plotinus and Proclus, he never fully subscribed to the Platonic view that the primary world is a world of shadows cast by ideal realities. Tolkien can be seen as essentially a Christian Neo-Platonist . . . while Tolkien probably took the term "secondary" from Coleridge, Tolkien's sub-creative art which creates secondary worlds is also capable of affording glimpses of joy and eternal truth. Coleridge did not feel that imagination could grasp truths which were beyond the scope of reason, although he believed that religious faith might do so.

(Swinfen, 1984, pp. 8-9)

A dissenting voice to the view that more than mere terminology is at stake is that of Jan Wojcik, who downplays the significance of this semantic distinction in order to affirm that Tolkien and Coleridge are in basic agreement as to "the functioning of the imagination in art, the nature of the artistic product, and the motives behind creation" (Wojcik, 1968, p. 134).

Regardless of how one views this matter, it is important to note that (subsidiary to his main thesis) Wojcik commits a significant error in his reading of Tolkien. In his framing of the issue of secondary belief and the willing suspension of disbelief, Wojcik claims that Tolkien "labors over words rather than meaning" (Wojcik, 1968, p. 137); for, he reasons, if these two expressions were to be taken literally, it would imply that Tolkien was arguing "as if there were an ontological difference in the kind of art inducing each state" (Wojcik, 1968, p. 136). Wojcik is absolutely correct in his reasoning on this point; what seems to escape him is the fact that this is exactly what Tolkien is arguing.

<sup>2</sup> This difficulty is compounded by Knight's own conflicting motivations for invoking Coleridge. On the one hand, he wants simply to highlight the similarities of the Inklings from a particular angle; on the other hand, he sees their differences as divisive to his attempt to "rescue" them from the appropriation of their writings in the cause of religious "orthodoxy". Knight's usage of Coleridge's ideas thus serves as a normative (rather than a merely heuristic) counter-framework of interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Tolkien does make explicit reference to George MacDonald and to G.K. Chesterton. For a useful analysis of the similarities between Tolkien's and MacDonald's views of fairy story, see Bergmann's 1977 article.

<sup>4</sup> Used by Coleridge in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia Literaria*, 1907.

My own view is that Tolkien's decision to take issue with Coleridge's expression is both conscious and intentional. Tolkien, it must be remembered, is speaking not of artistic creation in general but of a particular mode of art as distinct from others. Hence, Tolkien is not seeking to replace Coleridge's critical vocabulary as generally applicable to certain kinds of aesthetic experience; rather, he is asserting that there is a radical difference between the fairy story mode and all others. For so complete a distinction as Tolkien is attempting, a precise and substantive difference in terminology is called for.

Both secondary belief and the willing suspension of disbelief concern the reception of art; this, however, is ancillary to Tolkien's and Coleridge's differences regarding the nature and purpose of artistic creation itself. It is here that the true extent of Tolkien's revision of Romantic thought becomes apparent. In the essay, Tolkien identifies the fairy story mode with the term "fantasy" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45). This he does in reaction to what he characterizes as a misapplication of the meaning – "in technical not normal language" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 44) – of the term "imagination". Tolkien is here striking for the very heart of the Romantic tradition – that is to say, the role and status of the creative imagination. But while the terms "fancy" – which Tolkien views as "a reduced and depreciatory form of the older word Fantasy" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45) – and "imagination" play a central role in Coleridge's aesthetic thought, he did not invent them; nor is Tolkien, for that matter, justified in asserting their distinction to be one of "technical use" only:

Coleridge's famous distinction between "fancy" and "imagination" used to be thought either to have originated with him or to have had an obscure German source. But actually a growing distinction between the terms took place in English usage throughout the eighteenth century, and in much the same direction in which Coleridge developed or ramified it.

(Engell, 1981, p. 172)

Before reviewing the commentators on Tolkien's usage of these two terms, therefore, some background is needed to appreciate fully the weight of associations bound up with this pair. The term "imagination"

had not, by 1700, become connotative in a broad sense. It meant a fairly limited power connected, in the main, with the simple formation of images . . . By the 1720s and 1730s the imagination begins to acquire a distinctly positive character. It becomes the power not only to invent images but also to animate and excite, providing what Dryden called the "life-touches" and "secret graces" of art . . . it acquired a moral, aesthetic, and even religious value that was almost exclusively positive . . . As the idea evolved . . . it became a vital principle for an expanding network of concepts and values. The understanding of genius, poetic power, and originality, of sympathy, individuality, knowledge, and even of ethics grew and took lifeblood from the idea of the imagination.

(Engell, 1981, pp. 34, 41, 47)

This, in brief, is the background within which Tolkien is working in "On Fairy-Stories."

But it is also necessary to explain why the uses of fancy and imagination underwent the transformations that they did: we must ask why these more or less synonymous ideas became distinguished in the first place, why people came to insist on maintaining the distinction and, finally, why Tolkien found it necessary to revise it. James Engell, in his historical survey of Romanticism, remarks that Thomas Hobbes was apparently the last major writer to speak of fantasy or fancy in the non-depreciative sense:

As this distinction developed, it involved a reversal of the traditional distinction between the two terms. Coming from the Greek, *phantasia* carried with it the suggestion of creativity and play of mind, with the possible implication of license and illusion as a by-product of that freedom. The Latin *imaginatio*, on the contrary, had a block-like, Roman solidity derived from the primary word "image," which referred to a mental concept as much as a visual "image". It was akin to the word "imitation" and carried with it a sense of fidelity and accuracy. But precisely because *phantasia* suggested a greater freedom of mind, whether for creative insight, for perception, or for illusion, the word "fancy" began to bear the brunt of suspicion or distrust thrown by seventeenth century rationalism and, above all, by the fashionable colloquial speech that echoed it . . . In the search for a new or different word to express what . . . rationalism seemed to leave out, the more solid word "imagination," with its implication of being firmly rooted in the concrete, was at hand.

(Engell, 1981, p. 173)

The usage of *phantasia* and *imaginatio*, then, begins to shift as these ideas become caught up in other distinctions and concerns.

Tolkien's first move in "On Fairy-Stories" is to restrict the meaning of imagination to its pre-Romantic sense as the mental faculty of forming images of objects no longer present to the senses (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 44). In this he agrees with Hobbes' view of imagination as "decaying sense" (Engell, 1981, p. 14). It is also notable that many Romantic definitions of fancy agree with Tolkien's characterisation of the image-making faculty. What Tolkien has done, then, is to return imagination from its enlarged meaning and to recover its literal sense. "In the new hierarchy of terms," observes Wojcik,

Imagination would occupy its previous position in the Thomistic system which describes it as the image making function, and a new word, Fantasy (a word that Thomas held to be synonymous with imagination), would be the term which described [what Coleridge called] the "secondary" or "intellectualized" imagination.

(Wojcik, 1968, p. 135)

But why was it necessary to invent a categorical distinction where no such distinction had previously existed?

Tolkien's quarrel over the kind of "belief" induced by sub-creation already hints at a solution to this problem. What

seems to be at stake is the truth value of art in its various forms, particularly those forms which do not merely seek to “reproduce” or “imitate” empirical reality. This concern, in turn, addresses the question of the value and validity of art, which for Romantic thought comes to be signified by the image of the artistic process as analogous to God’s creative activity. While this vision of humanity as “sub-creative” has many precedents in both Classical and Renaissance thought (Engell, 1981, pp. 44, 50), it is only with the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it becomes wholly identified with the term “imagination” (Engell, 1981, p. 138). The inevitable semantic consequence of this amplification of meaning, as Tolkien himself observed (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 44), is that “imagination” must now stand for more than one thing; that is, both its literal meaning as the image-making faculty and its broader designation for the creative process as a whole. In assessing Tolkien’s remarks on this point, then, it will be helpful to consider whether his views about fantasy are best characterized as being Romantic or Classical.

Tolkien’s attempt at recovering a Classical (or Thomistic) sense of imagination is clear enough; but his treatment of fantasy is rather more nuanced and does not fit neatly into either category. Robert Reilly characterizes Tolkien as “elaborating” and “slightly qualifying” the Romantic view (1971, pp. 203-204). With respect to Coleridge, he sees Tolkien to be “defending,” “reviving,” and “making explicit and Christian Coleridge’s claim for the worth of the creative imagination” (Reilly, 1971, pp. 205, 210). Swinfen, on the other hand, once more emphasizing philosophical differences as the root of their semantic manoeuvring, sees Tolkien “to all intents and purposes” as consciously reversing Coleridge’s position (Swinfen, 1984, p. 8). Wojcik, viewing Tolkien’s apparent disagreements as red herrings, asserts that he is fundamentally in agreement with Coleridge (Wojcik, 1968, p. 134).

One reason for the wide divergence in judgement over this point is certainly the differing interests and concerns each commentator is addressing; yet just as central to their disagreement is a shared failure to identify the different concerns which Tolkien *himself* is addressing in his definition of fantasy as a distinct artistic mode. This failure to clarify his remarks leads Reilly to make a confusing and partially erroneous statement which Wojcik fails to correct in his own critique of Reilly’s argument. In his book *Romantic Religion*, Reilly states that Coleridge “thought of the two capacities [that is, fancy and imagination] as wholly distinct faculties”. “Tolkien,” he then goes on to claim, “would recombine them because he believes ‘the verbal distinction philologically inappropriate, and the analysis inaccurate’” (Reilly, 1971, p. 204). Wojcik, accepting Reilly’s characterisation of Tolkien’s position, suggests that “Coleridge would combine them also; and Tolkien is closer to Coleridge in his thinking than either he or Reilly think” (Wojcik, 1968, p. 135).

Wojcik and Reilly’s confusion derives from their conflation of two connected statements made by Tolkien which seem to be identical, but are in fact distinct in meaning. I quote these here in full:

[1] For my present purpose I require a word which shall *embrace* both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image: a quality essential to fairy-story.

[2] I propose, therefore, to arrogate to myself the powers of Humpty-Dumpty, and to use Fantasy for this purpose: in a sense, that is, which *combines* with its older and higher use as an equivalent of Imagination the derived notions of “unreality” (that is, of unlikeness to the Primary World), of freedom from the domination of observed “fact”, in short of the fantastic.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45, my emphasis)

If Tolkien does indeed speak of fantasy as “combining,” he also speaks of it as “embracing”. Beyond the obvious difference in the meaning of these two words, it must be noted that Tolkien is here using their nuance to clarify two separate aspects of his definition of fantasy. When he uses the expression “combining,” Tolkien is referring to the senses of meaning which he intends the word itself to evoke (as over against its conventional, depreciative sense). By contrast, when Tolkien speaks of fantasy as “embracing” he refers not to the semantic associations of the word, but rather to its referent, which is for him both the artistic process itself and the finished product.

What needs to be emphasized here is that Reilly is incorrect when he claims that Tolkien is combining the Coleridgean faculties of fancy and imagination. On the contrary, Tolkien insists that the two be categorically separated, “imagination” being restricted to its descriptive meaning as image-making, and “fantasy” elevated to replace the Romantic faculty of the creative imagination. In preserving this categorical distinction between fantasy and imagination, then, Tolkien is best characterized as Romantic rather than Classical. But Swinfen, too, is not wholly accurate in her claim that Tolkien simply “reverses” the terms of the distinction, for as we have already shown, Tolkien is not defining fantasy as a general mental faculty but as a distinct mode of art. In this, perhaps, he is unique to the Romantic tradition.

This cohabitation of both Romantic and Classical elements in Tolkien’s definition is also perceptible in the double sense which he attaches to the word “fantasy”. In Tolkien’s own words, he wishes the term to resonate with both “its older and higher use as an equivalent of Imagination” – that is, the Thomistic sense described by Wojcik – and “the derived notions of ‘unreality’ . . . of freedom from the domination of observed fact . . . of the fantastic” (in other words, its “depreciative” Romantic sense)<sup>5</sup>. “But while admitting that,” he continues, “I do not assent to the depreciative tone. That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that

<sup>5</sup> I take the Romantic-Classical model from Alex Lewis, whose article on the interplay of these elements in Tolkien’s own fiction concurs that Tolkien cannot be fit into either category (narrowly understood). See especially Lewis, 1988, p. 11.

indeed is possible) is a virtue not a vice. Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45). With these words it becomes clear that Tolkien is not (as Reilly would characterize him) only "slightly qualifying" Romantic conventions; he is in fact overhauling the entire framework of Romantic sensibilities by privileging fantasy as the very paradigm of all art. The keynote of Tolkien's revisionist view pivots on his refusal to assent to the depreciative usage of "fantasy," the origins of which we now turn to in more detail.

Behind the diminution of *phantasia* into fancy "lies the eighteenth-century tradition of empirical psychology" (Engell, 1981, p. 130). John Locke's famous distinction between simple and complex ideas generated reflection on the active and passive dimensions of human perception, ascribing to the mind both "productive" and "reproductive" powers (Engell, 1981, pp. 18, 20). It is into this cluster of related distinctions that the heretofore synonymous terms "fancy" and "imagination" were cast.

As with the Classical sense of *imaginatio*, the mind was capable of reproducing sense impressions as they were received from the empirical world. In addition to this, the mind could also actively alter, rearrange, and connect these impressions in a conscious, purposeful and productive way. The eighteenth-century expression for this latter power was "association," and the framework of associationist psychology was soon adopted into the critical vocabulary of Romantic aesthetics as a principle of artistic creation.

But not without modifications. From the preceding psychological distinction between the "reproduction" of images and their "productive" association, we might expect *phantasia* to designate the latter faculty as a positive foundation for the artistic process; but in fact what takes place is a further Romantic fracturing of the associative principle into a greater and a lesser degree, "almost every discussion of the imagination during the last third of the century," writes Engell:

contains either a direct or an implied distinction between "fancy" and "imagination". Although there is no clear-cut correspondence in all these distinctions, at least one generalization can be made. Most of them assume fancy . . . to be mainly an associative power that supplies the mind or the inner eye with numerous images . . . But the imagination fuses, combines, transforms, and orders images so that they produce an artistic or aesthetic unity.

(Engell, 1981, p. 176)

A three-fold understanding of perception as it pertains to art thus develops in Romantic thought. This may be summarized as a distinction between *memory* (the simple reproduction of sense-impressions, coextensive with human consciousness), *fancy* (the associative faculty of productively combining and rearranging sense-impressions), and *imagination* (the power of transforming these associations into art). There were several reasons for introducing this tripartite distinction, and a consideration of why fancy was

systematically excluded from the fold of genuine art will aid us in understanding Tolkien's motives for altering its conventional meaning.

Tolkien himself speaks of fancy as the "enchanter's power" and views the association of ideas in terms of the "the powers of generalisation and abstraction":

The human mind . . . 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. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well up on any plane . . . But in such "fantasy", as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 24-25)

But Tolkien, too, sees association as a lesser or subsidiary power, and so distinguishes it with his definition of imagination:

The mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination. The perception of the image, the grasp of its implications, and the control, which are necessary to a successful expression, may vary in vividness and strength: but this is a difference of degree in Imagination, not a difference in kind. The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) "the inner consistency of reality" (That is: which commands or induces Secondary Belief.), is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name: Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 44-45)

Again, it must be recalled that while the sense of Tolkien's term "fantasy" combines both the Classical definition of *imaginatio* with the associative, Romantic definition of fancy, what it *embraces* are not the faculties of *phantasia* and *imaginatio*, but rather two *moments* in the aesthetic act. This is perhaps best exemplified in "Leaf by Niggle", where Tolkien's artist, looking upon his realized art, calls it a gift: "He was referring to his art, *and also to the result*; but he was using the word quite literally" (Tolkien, 1989b, p. 88, my emphasis). For Tolkien, then, "the result" includes both the artefact itself and the act of beholding it.

Why Tolkien makes this distinction between the sense and referent of the word will be explored later; what is important

to note at present is that Tolkien is in fundamental agreement with the Romantic tradition as to the general character of association and its subsidiary status within the artistic process as a whole. Disagreement emerges only over the issue of where "fantasy" belongs within this framework. The tradition simply equates it with association, and so restricts it; Tolkien acknowledges its associative dimension, but then asserts that this is "a virtue not a vice". More specifically, there are two aspects of Tolkien's definition of fantasy which Romantic thought denies to associative fancy. These are 1) its inability to achieve aesthetic unity ("the inner consistency of reality"), and 2) its lack of connection to reality (its truth value).

These two aspects are in fact quite closely related. By definition it would be impossible for something without any relationship to reality whatsoever to be possessed of the "inner consistency" of the latter. Moreover, the lack of any reality-referent can also signify a lack of purpose, which in turn could make the goal of aesthetic unity unrealisable. Tolkien, of course, argues against such a view of fantasy. "Fantasy," he says, "is a rational not an irrational activity" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45). If it is indeed "rational" – that is, motivated and controlled by the faculty of reason – then it must involve (for Tolkien) both conscious will and purpose. At some level, it must also engage reason, as expressed by the question: "Is it true?" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 36).

Because one of the effects of successful fantasy is its inducement of a kind of subjectivity distinct from that produced by our perception of empirical reality – that is, of an affirming "secondary belief" – Tolkien must defend his assertion of the rationality of fantasy on two levels. The first of these concerns us with Tolkien's disagreement with the Romantic tradition over the relation between fantasy and the associative faculty; the second moves us finally to Tolkien's novel claim that narrative alone is the only proper mode of the fantastic. These two levels cannot be understood independently, for they rely upon one another for their coherence – if Tolkien had accepted the associative definition of fantasy, his subsequent restriction of fantasy to narrative would have been quite unnecessary. Before moving on to our evaluation of the significance of narrative for Tolkien, then, we must dwell for a little longer on Tolkien's response to the "depreciation" of fantasy by Romantic thought.

One of the limitations ascribed to fancy as association is that it is "mechanistic," and thus incapable of aesthetic unity. "This association can be spontaneous or willed, ordered or random, yet it is 'mechanical' because the images associated are not transformed; they appear in the bits and pieces in which they were first experienced" (Engell, 1981, p. 179). One of the limitations to such fancy is its apparent arbitrariness – the parading of its artifice of dissonant images which appear to lack any natural relationship to each other. Tolkien recognises this problem, but sees it as distinct from the issue of secondary belief:

Fantasy has . . . an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. Fantasy may be, as I think, not less but more sub-creative; but at any rate it is found in

practice that "the inner consistency of reality" is more difficult to produce, the more unlike are the images and the rearrangements of primary material to the actual arrangements of the Primary World. It is easier to produce this kind of "reality" with more "sober" material. Fantasy thus, too often, remains undeveloped; it is and has been used frivolously, or only half-seriously, or merely for decoration: it remains merely "fanciful". Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough – though it may already be a more potent thing than many a "thumbnail sketch" or "transcript of life" that receives literary praise.

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 46)

But here again Tolkien is simply arguing over whether the term "fantasy" ought to designate both association and the achievement of aesthetic unity.

Where he really comes into conflict with Romantic sensibilities is when he debunks the notion that the primary world is the only criterion from which to judge the aesthetic value of patently imaginative creations. For many Romantic thinkers, fantastic associations are merely fanciful because their existence is impossible in the primary world (Engell, 1981, p. 120). For Tolkien, by contrast:

Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded . . . Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood 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.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 39, 54-55).

Tolkien's vocabulary of "revealing," "ennobling," and "manifesting" clearly evokes the Romantic sense that human imagination is ultimately creative as God is creative. For Tolkien, then, purely fantastic creations (like the Pegasus) do constitute an aesthetic unity because the human desire from which they arise is natural rather than contrived. Their truth value rests not in their fidelity to the primary world but in their capacity to signify desire. This argument, however, simply transfers the question of validity from the signifier to the signified, and so Tolkien's defence of fantasy must ultimately be a defence of the legitimacy of human desire. It is this which leads Tolkien from the Romantic philosophy of art to his own convictions about humanity as a Catholic Christian. In this, his theory of fantasy undergoes significant departures from Romantic thought; and it is to these departures which we now turn.

## Drama and Narrative

For Tolkien, fantasy is a thing “best left to words, to true literature”:

It is a misfortune that Drama, an art fundamentally distinct from Literature, should so commonly be considered together with it, or as a branch of it. Among these misfortunes we may reckon the depreciation of Fantasy. For in part at least this depreciation is due to the natural desire of critics to cry up the forms of literature or “imagination” that they themselves, innately or by training, prefer. And criticism in a country that has produced so great a Drama, and possesses the works of William Shakespeare, tends to be far too dramatic. But Drama is naturally hostile to Fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 46-47)

To some, Tolkien's judgement may appear unnecessarily polemical, particularly when one recalls the intensely “dramatic” character of much of his own creative writing<sup>6</sup>, and perhaps it is for this reason that less attention has been paid to this aspect of “On Fairy-Stories”. But Tolkien's emphasis on the “hostility” of drama to fantasy, as I have been insisting and will now demonstrate, is an integral element to what makes him distinctive in the context of Romanticism.

Tolkien has basically two qualms about drama's attempting to be a medium of fantasy: 1) it necessarily relies on visual representation, and 2) it is necessarily anthropocentric in both its form and content. Beginning with the first problem, I will show that Tolkien's two revisions of the Romantic tradition already discussed – that is, his preference for the expression “secondary belief” over Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief, and his refusal to restrict the meaning of “fantasy” to its depreciatory sense as a mechanical, associative faculty – are identical in spirit and motive to his polemic against drama. Interestingly, we will find that Tolkien's criticism of the limitations of drama in many ways resonates with the conventional Romantic view of “fancy” as a lesser form of imagination.

A principal defect in dramatic attempts at achieving the fantastic, in Tolkien's view, is that: “the producers of drama have to, or try to, work with mechanism to represent either Fantasy or Magic” (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 47). If fantasy is difficult to achieve through words, how much more difficult is it to effect before the naked eye? These are good grounds for disqualifying drama in Tolkien's view since, for him, fantasy must be capable of producing secondary belief. Because drama is rarely able to conceal its own artifice it can, like Romantic fancy, hope to achieve little more than a willing suspension of disbelief.

If Tolkien's criticism were directed merely against this technical ineptitude of mechanism for producing visual fantasy, we might hold some doubts as to its continuing validity; for today, over half a century after the essay was written, we do possess a cinematic art (certainly both visual and dramatic) with the power of giving the inner consistency of reality to fantastic images with great facility. But Tolkien's reasoning is, in fact, much more comprehensive:

A reason, more important, I think, than the inadequacy of stage-effects, is this: Drama has, of its very nature, already attempted a kind of bogus, or shall I say at least substitute, magic: *the visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story*. That is in itself an attempt to counterfeit the magician's wand. To introduce, even with mechanical success, into this quasi-magical secondary world a further fantasy or magic is to demand, as it were, an inner or tertiary world. It is a world too much. To make such a thing may not be impossible. I have never seen it done with success. But at least it cannot be claimed as the proper mode of drama . . . For this precise reason – that the characters, and even the scenes, are in Drama not imagined but actually beheld – Drama is . . . an art fundamentally different from narrative art.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 48)

With drama the eye of the beholder must inevitably be focused upon the human condition – it is human beings who make up the primary content of dramatic performance. “Very little about trees as trees can be got into a play” (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 48). Moreover, Tolkien's claim that drama's difference from narrative lies in the fact of its being beheld rather than imagined is surely linked to literature's capacity to circumvent the dramatic focus on the humane.

In other words, it seems that we have here stumbled upon the beginnings of an understanding of the motive behind Tolkien's definition of fantasy as narrative art embracing both the act of artistic creation itself and the experience of the finished product. The principal content of fantasy or the fairy story (that is to say, the absence of a limited dramatic focus on the human condition as such) is somehow related in Tolkien's mind to the form in which the finished product is experienced (that is, through the exercise of the imaginative faculty rather than being “beheld” by the human eye). These two aspects of Tolkien's aesthetic (the non-anthropocentric and the non-visual) ultimately join forces to lay the foundation for his vision of fantasy as a narrative of alterity – of otherness, of transcendence. Taken together, these three dimensions of the visual form the mediating link between Tolkien's terminological disputes with Coleridge and his unique theology of the eucatastrophe as the highest function of fantasy. We examine each of these dimensions in turn.

<sup>6</sup> The “drama” of Tolkien's writing lies as much in the aurality of reading and hearing it as it does in the narrated story itself. In this respect, John Ellison observes that Tolkien's sub-creation “is a world of sound as much as it is a world of sense and specific meaning. Sound, that is, expressed not only through the medium of his languages, real and invented, but also in the wealth of sound images in the text, with all their consequentially evoked sensations of light and darkness, colour and space. This is the dimension of reality that Tolkien found to be lacking in spoken drama . . . *LoTR* plays itself out as an immense drama against a scenic panorama which each reader creates and paints in his or her own mind, and which no literal stage representation could even begin to rival” (Ellison, 1988, p. 18).

## 1. Imagination and the Visual

We begin by recalling that Tolkien's criticism of drama as fantasy extends beyond the incidental ineptitude of mechanism to the *fact* of its representing the fantastic visually:

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

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 70)

In the above-quoted passage we get a glimpse of Tolkien the Neo-Platonist (cf. Swinfen's remark, 1984, p. 9); but we also discover another important facet of his idea of secondary belief. We affirm here with the commentators that Tolkien seeks a stronger, more positive expression than Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief;" but *pace* Parks' view (cf. Parks, 1981) that Tolkien's intention is to strengthen the voice of the *narrator*, what he is in fact doing is expanding the role of the *hearer*. Just as in his art the artist actively participates in God's primary creative activity, so too in his or her hearing of the artist's narrative the hearer actively participates in the act of imagination induced (indeed, necessitated) by its non-visual character. In Tolkien's own words, such narrative makes it possible for artist and hearer to become "partners in making and delight" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 50)<sup>7</sup>.

This understanding aids us in further clarifying Tolkien's definition of fantasy as an artistic mode. Rather than speaking of a unity in the process of creation with the finished, sub-creative product, we might more accurately speak of a collaboration between the work of the author and the work of the reader/hearer; for the implication of Tolkien's remarks about narrative force us to view the

artistic product as unfinished until the hearer has actively "completed" it by way of imaginative effort. This, I believe, is the logic behind Tolkien's claim that fantasy must "embrace both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45).

All forms of art, to use Tolkien's vocabulary, involve the possession and use of the imaginative faculty, the artistic process itself, and the artistic product; within this schema, the fantastic narrative is distinguished by the particular character of the relationship between the author and hearer (or, alternately, between the two moments of artistic creation and reception). This can be illustrated by the following diagram:

"ART"	"THE EXPRESSION"
(the work of the artist)	(the imaginative work of the hearer)

"THE IMAGE"

(the imaginative faculty common to both artist and hearer)

The visual, then, is hostile to Tolkien's aesthetic because it destroys this special relationship between author and hearer which is necessary for the operation of fantasy<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Identity and Difference

Tolkien's second reason for the exclusion of drama as fantasy – its necessarily limited focus on the human condition – concerns not so much the means or operation of fantasy as its ultimate purpose or goal which, as we have already suggested, looks toward that which is other and transcendent to human experience. In this sense it is the limitations of the human condition itself which constitute a kind of visual presence needing to be transcended in order for fantasy to begin. This is the "quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image" of which Tolkien speaks – the quality which awakens our desire and invites us to participate in its operations.

The claim that fantasy is not properly "about" the human condition raises the thorny question of its value and validity as a product of human imagination. Despite Tolkien's assertion of its virtue (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 45), this question has served as a central rallying point in attacks levelled against the fantastic from many quarters, notably in the criticism of Tolkien's own work on the part of the literary establishment. If fantasy were "about" nothing other than itself, totally unconnected with reality, then it would indeed be legitimate to regard it as little more than an exercise in depreciative fancy. But as we have already seen, Tolkien

<sup>7</sup> In her unpublished thesis, Deirdre Greene (1989) has explored this dimension of Tolkien's aesthetic from the very fruitful perspective of reception theory. Her study of Tolkien's fictional writings provides insightful examples of how this "providential" relationship between the artist and the reader/hearer outlined at the philosophical level in "On Fairy-Stories" manifests itself in the very texture and event structure of his narrative at the literary level.

<sup>8</sup> One of Coleridge's motivations in insisting on the fancy-imagination distinction was the need to separate artistic genius from the unwashed masses, who are at best only capable of mechanical fancy (*Biographia Literaria* Chapter VI). Tolkien, by contrast, uses this distinction to *unite* the activity of the artist with the reader/hearer. The operation of fantasy is, indeed, impossible without the active, participatory role of the reader/hearer's imaginative faculty. It is the imagination which facilitates partnership in making and delight.

views fantasy as generated by *legitimate* human desires. Fantasy remains a valid art form because, for him, those desires refer to or anticipate something which itself possesses an "underlying reality" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 64), though a reality distinct from that which we now experience.

As we have seen, part of the self-referentiality of fantasy's being "about" itself stems from the unity of the form and content necessary to its operation: its non-visual mode of presentation offers us images of things which are themselves not to be seen within the world as we know it. It now appears that this correlation is intentional, and that Tolkien's insistence that fantasy embrace the activity of both artist and hearer is extended to its final goal as well as its operations. Tolkien expresses this view not only at the philosophical level, but in the content of his own creative writings. This is best seen in the role played by the Elves:

At the heart of many . . . stories of the elves lies, open or concealed, pure or alloyed, the desire for a living, realized sub-creative art . . . Of this desire the elves, in their better (but still perilous) part, are largely made; and it is from them that we may learn what is the central desire and aspiration of human Fantasy – even if the elves are, all the more in so far as they are, only a product of Fantasy itself.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 50)

The central desire of fantasy, then, is that our sub-creations be granted primary existence – that they become a part of reality. Tolkien's Elves signify this desire because (unlike us) they *do* possess the power (in the secondary world) of giving primary reality to their artistic creations. The Elves are "about" themselves because they are only a product of our imagination – once again, the forms which our imagination invents or "discovers" are identical or organically related to the content of our desires.

It would be accurate to say that, in this sense, Tolkien holds to an autotelic or self-generating view of fantasy (hence his claim for its validity), but only in the larger context of his Romantic belief in humanity as sub-creative – made, that is, "in the image and likeness of a Maker" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 52); for not all human desires are equally legitimate, and for this reason the Elves signify not only the identity of our desire, but the peril of difference – that which we cannot and should not seek to realize in this world. Tolkien therefore distinguishes genuine artistic desire (signified by Elvish "enchantment") from its counterfeit (which he calls "magic"):

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.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 49-50)

Tolkien also identifies magic with "the machine" (that is, technology):

Unlike art which is content to create a secondary world in the mind, [machinery] attempts to actualize desire, and so to create power in this World; and that cannot really be done with any real satisfaction . . . And in addition to this fundamental disability of a creature, is added the Fall, which makes our devices not only fail of their desire but turn to new and horrible evil.

(Tolkien, 1981, pp. 87-88)

Another aspect of visuality for Tolkien, then, is that it can suggest an illicit attempt to realize desire in this world – to display something visually becomes a metaphor of coercion.

It is for this reason that our desires, for Tolkien, must not only be expressed, but *contained* by the boundaries which separate art from the primary world<sup>9</sup>. Because the primary world is, for him, a fallen world, our sub-creative desire cannot help but be fraught with ambivalence and danger. Hence, the rejection of visuality constitutes one element in Tolkien's larger moral resistance to the perils and temptations of humanity's fallen nature. But if our desires are corruptible, so too they are in Tolkien's mind redeemable. Indeed, if the central desire of fallen humanity is the realization of its imaginative creations, then just as central must be the desire to escape our fallen state itself.

Romantic thought had made art the analogy of divine creation, but it is Tolkien who brings fantasy into a unique relationship with salvation history. Whereas tragedy is, for Tolkien, the highest function of drama, eucatastrophe is the highest function of fantasy, which he describes 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.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 62)

"The Birth of Christ," writes Tolkien, "is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation . . . It is not difficult to imagine," he continues,

the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be "primarily" true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed. It is not difficult, for one is not called upon to try and conceive anything of a quality unknown. The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the "turn" in a fairy-story gives . . . It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the *Gloria*,

<sup>9</sup> In her important structural study of the genre, Rosemary Jackson sees the representation of desire and its containment as two principal strategies deployed by fantastic literature to achieve its effects (Jackson, 1988, p. 3).

is of the same kind; but . . . this story is supreme, and it is true. Art has been verified.

(Tolkien, 1989a, pp. 65-66)

Tolkien's view of the Incarnation as "verifying" art is the key thought in the above-quoted passage which links it to the theme of visuality as realisation. Unlike most Romantic christologies which tend to focus on Christ as the prototype of artistic creation alone, Tolkien focuses not on the mediatory aspect of the person of Christ, but on the *fact* of incarnation itself – that desire has in fact been fulfilled in the primary world and, hence, becomes the prototype not of creation but of future fulfilment.

Unlike much Romantic thought, which came to ascribe a saving character to the exercise of the imagination, Tolkien viewed salvation as strictly the province of the *evangelium* itself. In characterising the eucatastrophe of human fantasy as "looking forward or backward" toward the primary eucatastrophe, however, he nevertheless grants it a special status – not only verifying the *evangelium* and being verified by it in turn, narrative fantasy also comes to confirm our continued nature as sub-creators. It looks not only backward to the Incarnation; it looks forward to the Parousia and final redemption. In this latter function it becomes not so much the analogy to salvation, but prophetic in character. This moves us to the final (and in this case positive) sense which the visual signifies for Tolkien, which he calls "recovery."

### 3. Recovery as the Redemption of the Visual

Tolkien describes recovery as the "regaining of a clear view":

I do not say "seeing things as they are" and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them" – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 53)

This rediscovery of difference is crucial to Tolkien's defence of fantasy because it gives a rationale for its independent value apart from the anticipation of the *evangelium*. Like the many leaves of a single tree, each new story "is a *unique* embodiment of the pattern" (Tolkien, 1989a, p. 52, my emphasis). "No assumptions about the nature of reality, even purely supernaturalist or acausal beliefs held absolutely, release the storyteller from the *task* of *making* a story" (Parks, p. 147). In this respect, the unrealisability of human desire as signified by the non-visual character of fantasy refers as much to a positive aspect of our nature as it does to the negative consequences of the Fall – if desire were absolutely satisfied, it would imply that our role as sub-creators was at an end. But this is surely not the case: "Redeemed Man," writes Tolkien, "is still man":

Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on . . . So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.

(Tolkien, 1989a, p. 66)

### Conclusion

Two general conclusions may be drawn from this analysis of Tolkien's thinking. Firstly, Tolkien's revisions of Romantic thought are necessary components to his defence of literary fantasy as a genre in its own right. Secondly, while eucatastrophe remains Tolkien's unique contribution to Christian Romanticism, it is his insistence upon the non-visual character of fantasy (rather than the idea of sub-creation as such) which structurally links Tolkien's aesthetics to his theology, and it is an appreciation of this link which allows us to view Tolkien's Romanticism as an integral dimension to his life and work as a whole.

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