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Fantasy and the Tradition of Christian Art

Abstract

Argues that “Christianity [...] was instrumental in making fantasy literature conceptually possible” by undermining “the principle of art as mimesis”—through the Hebraic injunction against idols and the Christian view of pagan myths as untrue but acceptable as “aesthetically delightful.”

Additional Keywords

Christian art—Relation to fantasy; Jewish art—Relation to fantasy; Mimesis in art; Poiesis in art

Fantasy and the Tradition of Christian Art

Gene Edward Veith

Christian writers today are often drawn to fantasy. This is true of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams -- that great circle of fantasy writers and Christian apologists -- as well as contemporary writers who have been influenced by them such as Madeleine L'Engle, Stephen Lawhead, Walter Wangerin, Jr., and many others. This affinity of deeply religious Christian authors with the form of fantasy fiction is not new. Pioneers of the genre such as George MacDonald, Jonathan Swift, John Bunyan, Edmund Spenser, and the authors of the great medieval romances were people of great piety who were also geniuses of the creative imagination. Not only is there a tradition of Christian fantasy, but Christianity itself was instrumental in making fantasy literature conceptually possible. Specifically, the Hebrew tradition of art, in its Biblical assault on pagan mythology, undermined the principle of art as *mimesis* (or imitation) and in so doing nourished the idea that art need not be tied to objective reality, a concept which encouraged the development of fantasy.

Western aesthetics has been dominated by that of the ancient Greeks. For Plato and Aristotle, art is essentially mimetic; that is, an imitation of the external world. This view of art has led to representational sculpture, figurative painting, and realistic fiction. There is, however, another view of art, which, to use another venerable Greek word, we can describe as *poiesis* (from the Greek word "to make"); that is, a creation by the artist of something that does not already exist as such in the external world (Scholes, p. 7). This view has led to non-representational sculpture, abstract painting, and the radical fictionality of fantasy. Certainly, *mimesis* and *poiesis* can be seen as complementary, both being essential to art and even to fantasy. Still, a predominantly mimetic view of art will tend to produce one kind of work, and a predominantly poetic view of art will tend to produce another kind.

Although the Greek language contains the concept of *poiesis*, giving us our word for "poet," both Plato and Aristotle undercut the artistic implications of their own language and terminology: "But would you call the painter a creator and maker?" asks Socrates after a long discussion on the subject. "Certainly not," replies Glaucon, to the approval of his master (*Republic*, Book 10, p. 45). For Aristotle, although "people do, indeed, add the word 'maker' or 'poet' to the name of the meter," he insists that it is "the imitation that makes the poet" (*Poetics*, I, 7, p. 20). Aristotle classifies types of stories according to the objects that they are imitating. Of course the Greeks were not interested in slavish realism; artists imitate the ideals, and can present human beings as they are, as worse than they are (as in comedy), or a better than they are (as in tragedy) (*Poetics*, II, p. 20).

Certainly the Greeks also created what we would classify as fantasy -- the great epic cycles and the rich mythology of the gods. It is important to understand, however, that the Greeks believed their mythology to be true. They had little concept of fiction as such, and they certainly did not think of their mythology as fantasy. More thoughtful Greeks came to reject the mythology as silly fables that debase the

gods. Their response, though, was not to enjoy the myths as fantasies but to reject them as lies. For a Greek, the myths were either true or false. The ordinary helot governed his life by them; Socrates branded them as lies and accepted the hemlock. In the mimetic tradition, art is judged according to its correspondence to the objective world of facts and ideas. There is little conceptual room for fantasy, for a story that is not true and never pretends to be true.

It was left to another ancient civilization to make possible a truly poetic view of art. This took place, indirectly and paradoxically, to be sure, by means of Biblical iconoclasm, the total rejection of pagan images and thought-forms that might rival the monotheistic faith. The distinctiveness of the Hebrew view of art, as opposed to that of the Greeks and the Hebrews' pagan neighbors, is enshrined in no less than the Ten Commandments:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God. (Exodus 20:4-5; KJV)

This Commandment is condemning idolatry, the practice of worshipping tangible images of the gods that is nearly universal in polytheistic cultures. The Hebrews were not to emulate their Canaanite neighbors, which would mean slipping away from their exclusive worship of the one transcendent God into the sort of paganism that characterized all other ancient cultures. The Commandment, however, forbids not only bowing down and serving religious images, but it also forbids the making of "any likeness of any thing" in heaven, on earth, or in the water. As such, it explicitly strikes at the heart of *mimesis*, which is precisely the making of "likenesses."

Certainly this is how the Commandment was construed by the ancient Hebrews. The Bible does not forbid representational art as such, as is evidenced by the art of the Tabernacle that is called for in the following chapters of Exodus and, later, in the art of the Temple. Pomegranates, lilies, almond blossoms, lions, oxen, palm trees, and even spiritual beings such as cherubim were to be portrayed representationally in the most sacred shrine of the one true God (Exodus 25:18-20, 31-35; 26:31; 1 Kings 7:2-37). Nevertheless, most Jews interpreted the Commandment very strictly and refused to countenance any representational art. Josephus records the uproar and rioting in Jerusalem when Pontius Pilate brought realistic busts of Caesar into the city (p. 379).

And yet, the prohibition of images did not forbid art. Rather, it channeled art into new directions. The ancient Hebrews did not decorate their pottery, coins, and textiles with images of animals and gods; rather, they decorated them with geometric patterns, complex colors, and abstract designs. The possibilities of Middle Eastern non-representational art can perhaps best be seen today in the art of Islam, which in many ways has continued and extended the tradition of

monotheistic abstractionism. A Persian carpet or the ornamentation of a mosque exhibits a complexity of color, form, and design that staggers the Western mind, accustomed at most to the relatively impoverished imagination of modern abstract minimalism. The minute details of the patterns, considered separately, seem chaotic in their bold colors and labyrinthine shapes, yet viewed from a distance those details harmonize into a larger design that is symmetrical and ordered, evoking the apparent contingency of human life subsumed under the all-seeing providence of God.

One of the most significant art forms for Jews, Muslims, and early Christians -- the "People of the Book" whose faith centered around a revealed book of Scripture -- was calligraphy. The designs of the Alhambra are variations of Arabic script recording verses from the Koran. The Jewish scribes and the Christian monks whose vocation was to copy the Sacred Scriptures by hand also began decorating them with dazzling designs. The intricate artistry of medieval illuminated manuscripts is very similar to that of Middle Eastern abstractionism.

In these manuscripts -- and this is true of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian illuminations -- there appear what may be the beginnings of fantasy. In the midst of the Sacred Text appear plants with human heads, two-headed dogs, fanciful dragons and sea-monsters, winged composite animals, gargoyles of every description that cavort across the sacred page. The significance of these figures -- variously described as "grotesques," "zoomorphic figures," "arabesques," or "drollery" -- is somewhat puzzling to most scholars (see Pacht, 28, 144, 215; Grabar, 98; and Gutman 19, 59, 77, 84). It is at least possible, though, that, on one level, they represent an attempt to draw something that is a likeness of nothing in heaven, on earth, or in water -- the imagining of creatures that do not exist and therefore cannot be blasphemous. To re-arrange physical details and structures of nature into new combinations that are pleasing or amusing -- in other words, making up a monster -- is the equivalent of abstract art, which rearranges existing geometrical forms and colors into aesthetically pleasing combinations. It is also the equivalent of fantasy.

With the coming of Christianity, the Hebraic heritage and the Greek heritage were brought together. Gentle Christians had little problem with mimetic art as such. The doctrine of the Incarnation, that God became flesh in Jesus Christ, and the centrality of the Sacraments both implied that God does reveal Himself by means of natural, tangible forms. After the early iconoclastic controversies, the Christian Church was able to appropriate mimetic and even devotional art in a way that would have been anathema to the ancient Hebrews. Still, the early Church was engaged in a Biblical struggle that was to be crucial to the conceptual development of fantasy.

Christianity at first had to assert itself against the established mythological religious systems of the Greco-Roman world, and, later, of Northern Europe. Like the Old Testament prophets, the Christian church had to strenuously condemn the old mythologies that rivaled the true faith. St. Augustine, for example, spent a great deal of time in *The City of God* debunking Greco-Roman mythology, which remained, even after the Fall of Rome, a major rival to the new faith. This necessary iconoclasm and critique of mythology on the part of the early church was, for the most part, successful. Christianity supplanted the pagan

religions, so that today no one seriously believes in the tales of Zeus and Apollo.

And yet, Christianity, while condemning the Greek and Roman myths as being untrue, retained them in their educational and cultural curriculum. As long as the stories were understood to be not literally true, they could be read with delight and profit. Virgil retained his popularity among the Christians and occupied a central place in the teaching of the Latin language for centuries. Pastoral and epics were enormously popular throughout Christendom. The mythological machinery was still evident -- as any reading of Dante or Chaucer will show -- but it was "demythologized," being interpreted as ornament, allegory, and fiction. Thus, according to Werner Jaeger, the great classical scholar, "It was the Christians who finally taught men to appraise poetry by a purely aesthetic standard -- a standard which enabled them to reject most of the moral and religious teaching of the classical poets as false and ungodly, while accepting the formal elements in their work as instructive and aesthetically delightful" (xxvii-xxviii).

In other words, by rejecting the myths as true stories, Christianity enabled people to enjoy them as fantasies. Fiction, as an imaginative realm separate and distinct from the "real world," became conceptually clear. This is not to say that fiction was seen as being totally unrelated to the "real world." The relationship, though, was understood as being thematic or symbolic, offering idealized examples that can clarify real human experience and allegorizing moral or philosophical truths. Thus, the early Christian attack on mythology opened up a space in which fantasy could develop.

Another step in the development of fantasy came with the re-emphasis on the Bible that accompanied the Protestant Reformation. Charging medieval Catholicism with erecting a whole new mythological structure, the reformers revived iconoclasm and, in reemphasizing a distinctly biblical aesthetic, gave fantasy its definitive shape.

When reformers attacked religious art in churches as being violations of the commandment's prohibition of images, they were not rejecting art as such. As with the Jews, their aesthetic impulses were channeled into other directions -- into portraiture and paintings of secular subjects, and into music and poetry, all of which were forms of art that did not involve bowing down to graven images. "The Puritan's high esteem for music," observes Lawrence Sasek, "his usual exemption of it from the criticism and suspicions directed at the other arts, arose from its nonrepresentational nature.... Its appeal was purely aesthetic, and by accepting it, the Puritans accepted art as form, unmixd with theological or moral elements" (p. 116).

It is perhaps ironic that those who took the Biblical prohibition of images the most strictly became the greatest exemplars of fantasy and turned it into a sophisticated literary genre. Modern fantasy perhaps begins with Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queen*, an under-read literary masterpiece that was one of C.S. Lewis' favorite books. Continuing the tradition of the medieval romances -- tales of knights and their often supernatural adventures -- Spenser went further to create a wholly-realized imaginative world, what Tolkien would term the "sub-creation" of a "secondary world" (pp. 139-140). Spenser's Fairy Land, inhabited by a host of heroes, villains, and monsters involved in

the most labyrinthine of interconnecting plots, was also designed as an allegory of the Christian character. (Tolkien, to be sure, disliked allegory contaminating fantasy, although C.S. Lewis defended it through most of his scholarly writing and in much of his own fiction.) Turning fantasy into allegory -- or vice versa -- had a long medieval tradition, and it flourished during the Reformation. Its most famous practitioner, and perhaps in his own way the most influential, was John Bunyan, whose allegory of Christian's journey towards salvation not only edified the souls of countless readers from all walks of life, but also fueled their imaginations. Although different in their ecclesiology, both Spenser and Bunyan were strong partisans of Reformation theology, with its distrust of graven images.

To understand their affinity for fantasy, it will be helpful to consider the literary theory of one of the greatest of Renaissance critics, Sir Philip Sidney. Like Spenser, his contemporary, Sidney was a militant Protestant reformer and a sophisticated, self-conscious artist. Sidney's *Arcadia* was a long prose fantasy built around the model of Greek pastorals, but it was in his *Apology for Poetry* that Sidney articulated the first coherent theory of fantasy. Plato, of course, had banned poets from his Republic because they deal with imitations (mimesis) rather than what is truly real. Sidney is defending poetry from Plato's critique, as well as from that of certain contemporary writers who had argued that imaginative literature is a waste of time. In doing so, Sidney presents a theory of literature as *poesis* rather than *mimesis*. For Sidney, a poet is not simply a versifier but a "maker" in the original sense of the Greek word. The poet has a "name above all names of learning," says Sidney (p. 86), because all other intellectual endeavors -- astronomy, law, history, rhetoric, medicine, metaphysics -- depend upon "what Nature will have set forth."

Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclopes, Chimeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. (p. 85)

Sidney foreshadows Tolkien in seeing human creativity in terms of the creativity of God, in whose image human beings have been created.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings. (p. 86)

Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* is well-named, since he is defending the very concept of *poesis*. Sidney appropriates the insights of the mimetic theories and of Plato himself by arguing that the poet imitates ideals, not the crassness of nature as it is, and in so

doing provides models of virtue and wisdom that transcend those in the sinful world. When Sidney defends imaginative writers against the charge of lying, though, the possibilities for Western literature of fantasy and of fiction itself suddenly unfold: "Of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar." Astronomers, geometicians, and historians, he says, can hardly avoid lying, in that mistakes about nature are inevitable for fallen human beings. Poets, though, cannot lie, as Sidney explains:

Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet... never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire him a good invention; in truth, not labouring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not. (p. 97)

In other words, the imaginative writer cannot lie because the world of fiction never pretends to be true. The poet is not bound by the imitation of external reality; rather, the poet is "making" an imaginary world. According to Sidney, readers must look for an entirely different category of experience when they turn to imaginative literature, one that is distinct from, though still related to, "truth." And therefore, as in History, looking for truth, they go away full fraught with falsehood," says Sidney, "so in Poesy, looking for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention" (p. 97).

Sidney's *Apology* amounts to a "declaration of independence" for fantasy. The history of Western literature exhibits a vacillation between the poles of *mimesis* and *poesis*. The flowering of fantasy in the Renaissance was countered by the reassertion of *mimesis* in the eighteenth-century with the dominance of neo-classicism (although Christian iconoclasts such as Swift continued to keep the genre alive). The nineteenth-century was a time of great resurgence of fantasy. Romanticism took its name from the medieval romances, whose sense of wonder and imaginative stimulation the Romantic poets sought to rekindle. Certainly other forces were influential in the development of fantasy, such as German idealism and complex secular responses to the Enlightenment, but here too the Biblical aesthetic asserts itself.

After Sidney, the most important theorist for fantasy would be Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In their collaboration on the ground-breaking volume of poetry *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth was supposed to write so that the ordinary would seem supernatural, whereas Coleridge was supposed to write so that the supernatural would seem ordinary. Or, as Coleridge puts it, his goal was "to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (*Biographia Literaria*, XIV, 376). In

forging concepts such as the "willing suspension of disbelief" and "the creative imagination," Coleridge has given a theoretical underpinning to fantasy that is important to this day. What is not generally realized is Coleridge's interest in Reformation theology and the influence of the Bible on his thought. Speaking of the Bible, Coleridge says that "a large part of the light and life, in which and by which I see, love, and embrace the truths and the strengths co-organized into a living body of faith and knowledge... has been directly or indirectly derived to me from this sacred volume." In fact, Coleridge says that he is "unable to determine what I do not owe to its influences" (*Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Prickett, p. 9). Coleridge's consciousness was profoundly and sensitively shaped by the Bible and by the theology of grace that was to solace him in the torment of his opium addiction. More directly, Coleridge was influenced by the German idealists, who were likewise engaged in rethinking the assumptions of classicism.

These German theorists of Romanticism, in reacting against neoclassical rationalism, again turned towards the Biblical heritage, as opposed to that of the Greeks. Stephen Prickett has shown how the Biblical scholarship of the time tied in to and influenced the new theories about language and literature. A key figure is Johann Herder, whose book *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, a study of the Psalms and their differences with conventional western poetry, set forth the possibilities of a very different conception of literature. Herder sees Adam, who was permitted by God to give names to all of the animals, as the first poet:

In giving names to all, and ordering all from the impulse of his own inward feeling, and with reference to himself, he (Adam) becomes an imitator of the Divinity, a second Creator,... a creative poet. Following this origin of the poetic art, instead of placing its essence in an imitation of nature, as has generally been done, we might still more boldly place it in an imitation of that Divine agency which creates, and gives form and determinateness to the objects of its creation. (Prickett, p. 54)

The poet does not imitate nature, according to Herder. Instead, the poet imitates God by being, like God, someone who can create by means of language. The poet is "a second Creator," a truly "creative poet." Herder substitutes creation for imitation to describe what the poet does, a concept he derives directly from the Book of Genesis.

Jan Gorak has discussed how Western thought contains two different understandings of creation (pp. 8-9). The Greeks, both in their philosophy and in their myths, saw creation as the imposition of form upon pre-existent matter. In this view, God and, by extension, the artist, create by working with what is already there, exerting craftsmanship and an ordering design on material that exists already. The Bible, though, and Christian theology teach creation *ex nihilo*, that God created the universe from nothing, based only on His sovereign will. Creation, in this view, means calling into existence something that is completely new. Although both theories of creation have relevance to human art, the writer of fantasy, who does not feel constrained to imitate the world as it is but who instead is imagining a world with its own design, is something of a creator *ex nihilo* and an heir of the Biblical tradition.

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