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Abstract

Analyzes Dante in terms of Tolkien's theory of the Fairy-story. Sees the loss of Virgil and recovery of Beatrice as a significant eucatastrophe.

Additional Keywords

Dante—Characters—Beatrice; Dante—Characters—Virgil; Dante. Divine Comedy; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"—Relation to Divine Comedy

Commedia as Fairy-story

Eucatastrophe in the Loss of Virgil

John William Houghton

In the thirteenth canto of the *Purgatorio* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the poet's beloved Beatrice replaces Virgil as his guide. While Beatrice herself will later be replaced, she and Dante part then only so that she can return to her place in the eternal Rose, the company of Heaven in which she and Dante part from the pagan Virgil. It is a final separation — master and student will never meet again, in time or in eternity. The whole canto is too long to quote, but in Dorothy Sayers' translation, the heart of the passage runs like this:

- 31 In a while veil beneath an olive-crown
 Appeared to me a lady cloaked in green,
 And living flame the colour of her gown;
- 34 And instantly, for all the years between
 Since her mere presence with a kind of fright
 Could awe me and make my spirit faint within,
- 37 There came on me, needing no further sight,
 Just by that strange, outflowing power of hers,
 The old, old love in all its mastering might.
- 40 And, smitten through the eyesight unawares
 By that high power and pierced me, heart and reins,
 Long since, when I was but a child in years,
- 43 I turned to leftward — full of confidence
 As any little boy who ever came
 Running to mother with his fears and pains —
- 46 To say to Virgil: "There is a scarce a dram
 That does not hammer and throb in all my blood;
 I know the embers of the ancient flame."
- 49 But Virgil — he had left us, and we stood
 Orphaned of him; Virgil, dear father, most
 Kind Virgil I gave me to my soul's good;
- 52 And not for all that our first mother lost
 Could I forbid the smutching tears to steep
 My cheeks, once washed with dew from all their dust.
- 55 "Dante, weep not for Virgil's going — keep
 As yet from weeping, weep not yet, for soon
 Another sword shall give thee cause to weep."¹

This moment of mingled loss and recovery is like a sharpened gem on which the vast structure of the *Commedia* is balanced. Its central importance is underlined by the fact that line 55 is the only place in the whole poem in which Dante's name is used. Many forces bear on the passage: forces generated not only by the relationships between Dante the character and the two people he loves, but also by the mythological and literary settings with which Dante the poet has surrounded the three.

Part of Dante's genius as a poet is his ability to shift vast complexes of pagan culture into a Christian register — he even makes an allusion to Jason and the Argonauts in the process of describing his own vision of God (*Paradiso*, XXXIII.96). The loss of pagan Virgil and the recovery of Christian Beatrice represent such a shift, not only at the level of character, but also at the mythological level. Simple analysis of the mythological "plot" can show us the first stage of the way Dante makes the shift in this case: he does so by finally resolving an ambiguity in the identification of his characters with the characters in the myths. But J.R.R. Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-stories" illuminates the second stage of the shift: for the way in which Dante resolves that ambiguity exemplifies a central element of the Fairy-story — an element with powerfully Christian connotations. In fact, once we look at Dante's poem in terms of a Fairy-story, we find that the characteristics Tolkien attributes to that genre cast a somewhat unexpected light on the larger course of the *Commedia*.

I. Ambiguous Eurydices

Throughout the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, two versions of the fairy-story of the Quest have been operating simultaneously: the Orphic Descent and Perilous Journey. The two co-exist easily, for they are not entirely dissimilar. The wonders of the otherworld seen by the classical Orpheus or the mediaeval Sir Orfeo are at least somewhat perilous for the traveller, and the King of those realms, whether god or fairy, has all the numinous power of death. Similarly, the abduction of the lady which usually lies at the roots of the Perilous Journey is equally a part of the story of Eurydice: indeed, I think I have seen someone observe that the seizures of Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo* and Guenivere in Book XIX of *Le Morte D'Arthur* could easily have occurred on the same May morning in neighboring counties. Thus, in the story up until *Purgatorio* XXX, we have been able to see Virgil principally as the guide on the journey and secondarily as the "Eurydice," that is, the one who might be brought out of the Kingdom of Death. The various reminders that Virgil cannot leave Hell² serve largely to make us feel that he should, even if they conceive us to think that he should not. Indeed, on what we would be tempted to call another level if the narrative were not itself saturated with associations between poets and the immortality of honor and fame,³ Dante the poet does bring Virgil out of death, giving him new life in the vulgar tongue as character in the *Commedia*, an allusive base for the *Commedia's* words and images, and as exemplar of the project of epic poetry.

Beatrice, for her part, has been principally the object of the journey, and, to a much lesser degree, a competitor with Virgil for the Eurydice role. In her first capacity, we are reminded of her specifically at some of the points where Dante in passing through perils, rather than simply observing, e.g. in *Inferno* IX, where the stymied Virgil reflects on her commission, and XV, where she appears in the middle of Dante's conversations with Brunetto Latini and the poet's particular peril of "mak[ing] himself eternal" (l.85), or in *Purgatorio* XXVII, where she is the lure to pull Dante through the wall of fire (a particularly typical device of the Perilous Journey, according to Sayers⁴). Her second capacity is principally a structural one: we would expect that Orpheus should meet Eurydice at the central point of his journey, as Dante meets Beatrice, whereas Virgil, despite his other resemblance to Eurydice, has accompanied Dante from the very beginning of his trip. Thus even while the coming of Beatrice and departure of Virgil fulfills the primary issue, that of the Perilous Journey, it presses for a resolution to the secondary, Orphic question: Which of these two characters are we to take as Eurydice?

It would be perfectly possible for Beatrice, as the Lady of the perils, to be further identified as Eurydice at this point, making Virgil merely a guide in each aspect of the plot: such an identification would, in effect, collapse the Orphic and Perilous quests onto one, and suggest that we see the *Paradiso* as an ascent from the otherworld as well as a return from the tower of the lady's imprisonment. Nor would equation of Beatrice with Eurydice require that Dante "lose" Beatrice at the end of the poem: Sir Orfeo, for example, keeps his Heurodis (alternatively, one might argue that Beatrice's replacement constitutes a loss, however temporary).

Beatrice could be depicted as Eurydice; yet Dante the poet makes the other choice. When Dante the pilgrim notices that Virgil has left, the narration (as has been often noted) echoes a classic description of the moment when Orpheus, himself dead, still cries out for his lost love: "tossed in mid-stream, that head, that very voice and frigid tongue, called, as the spirit fled away 'Eurydice! O poor Eurydice!' And all the riverbanks reechoed: 'Eurydice.'" The three-fold naming of Virgil at his last appearance in the *Commedia* is meant to remind us of this three-fold naming of Eurydice, at the very end of her story, and so the ambiguity is resolved: Virgil is Dante's Eurydice, and the loss is eternal. There is more to it than that, however: Dante's allusion is not simply to some arbitrary description of the loss of Eurydice, but to Virgil's own description of that loss from the *Georgics*, Book IV, lines 525-527. Moreover, line 563 of that book is the only place where Virgil names himself, so that Dante's unique "Dante" in line 55 becomes a further confirmation of the intended allusion.

Thus Dante the writer puts Virgil's departure, with special poignancy, in terms of the pagan poet's own version of one of the classical world's most profound tragedies, a story which played for many in Virgil's time for a role comparable to that of Good Friday for Dante's. In resolving the Orphic plot, Dante has taken the most tragic option available to him, even though this reemphasized

bereavement necessarily coincides with the long-awaited fulfillment of the Perilous Journey plot.⁵ If making Beatrice Eurydice would have married the two quests, making Virgil Eurydice stabs the tragedy of one into the rejoicing heart of the other. According to Tolkien, that juxtaposition of pain and joy is typical of the fairy-story.

II. Tolkien and Fairy-stories

Tolkien entitled his 1939 Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St. Andrews "On Fairy-stories" (an appropriate topic, in view of his own recent success and Lang's anthologies for children): but "fairy-story" is a net Tolkien tosses wide enough to include Hrothgar and Arthur as well as Rapunzel and Cinderella. After a preliminary definition of the term, including a significant observation that fairy-stories, unlike some other forms of fiction, must always claim to be true, he briefly surveys the origins of such stories, including their relationship to myth. In this connection he observes:

Even fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of faerie is the middle one, may be used as a *Mirour de l'Homme*; and it may (but not easily) be made a vehicle of Mystery.⁶

This idea of the Mystical power of fairy-stories will recur in the epilogue to the lecture with particular force, when Tolkien talks of the higher achievements of the genre. Immediately, however, in the third section of the speech, Tolkien demolishes the idea that fairy-stories are primarily children's literature, and so arrives at the constructive part of his lecture, the definition of four distinctive qualities of fairy-stories: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape and Consolation.

"Fantasy" is the art which operates on the images produced by the faculty of imagination to construct a compelling secondary reality, a fiction which claims to be true: in Tolkien's word, a "Sub-creation." Fantasy, Tolkien says, is the highest form of human art (p. 69): the only thing more powerful would be pure Enchantment, the creation of a secondary reality which author and audience could actually enter and experience as a primary reality. Fantasy is entitled to pride of place not only because of this raw power but also because of its unique role in theological anthropology: the story of Genesis tells us (Tolkien reminds his audience) that human beings are made in the image and likeness of One whose only evident characteristic at that point in the story is to create. Thus it is central to our nature to be sub-creators.

"Recovery" is the recovery of a right view of the world, the recapture of a sense of power around us. In one of the flashes of rhetoric which become more frequent as the lecture proceeds, Tolkien says:

By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horse were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory (p. 78)

Thus, for Tolkien, our trip into faerie restores us to a lively vision of our own reality.

"Escape" is the other side of Recovery: if Fantasy helps us to see this world as we were meant to see it, it also allows us to see what never was, to satisfy wishes which otherwise go unmet. Some of those wishes may simply be curiosity: the desire to talk to the animals, or to fly; other wishes run deeper, and one pierces to the heart: the desire for deathlessness. The elves are, after all, the *longaevi*, the long-lived ones, and tales of humans meeting with them are apt to contrast their lives with ours, more often than not to the effect that immortality is a burden not lightly to be wished for.

"Consolation" can be merely the handmaiden of Escape, such satisfaction (or warning) as we get from seeing our wishes comes true; but more typical, indeed, definitive for the genre, is the "Consolation of the Happy Ending." Tolkien says that, as Drama is most characterized by Tragedy, so Fairy-story is marked by an opposite of Tragedy for which he coins the word "Eucatastrophe," the sudden turn toward the good. It is important to note that the concept to which Tolkien is pointing cannot be expressed as "Comedy": for Comedy deals with an absurd world which takes a turn toward normalcy,⁷ whereas Eucatastrophe and Tragedy begin in the normal world but proceed in opposite directions. In Tragedy, we see the rise of the hero, and his sudden downfall at the very moment of success: in Eucatastrophe, we see the fall of the hero, and his sudden salvation at the moment of disaster. "In such stories," says Tolkien, "when the sudden 'turn' comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through." (p. 87)

In an Epilogue to the lecture, Tolkien goes on to point out that if Fantasy has the inner structure of reality, if the fairy-story pre-eminently poses as true, then to posit Eucatastrophe as a characteristic of the genre is also to claim that it is characteristic of the primary world, to assert that the "gleam" is not fictitious, but rather comes from a moment when the primary world, having fallen to the point of ultimate disaster, was in that very disaster turned back toward triumph. In brief, every fairy-story, by its nature, points to the Gospel as the "greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe.... Legend and History have met and fused." (p. 88) With such a Christianization of the very center of the genre, Tolkien gives what is for him the fullest possible force to his earlier remarks about the mystical possibilities of fairy-stories.

III. Virgil, Beatrice and Eucatastrophe

The loss of Virgil and recovery of Beatrice, the devastation insisted upon in the midst of the joy of *Purgatorio* XXX, constitute a eucatastrophic moment. One might object that the elements come in the wrong order: it would seem Dante knows Beatrice in ll. 39-48, and loses Virgil in ll. 49-54. But ll. 22-54 describe only a single moment, as Dante explicitly says in the Italian of l. 40 (*Tosto che ne las vista mi percosse*, "As soon as on my sight there smote..."), and we do not in any case know the exact moment of Virgil's departure — it may indeed be at the moment of Beatrice's appearing, in line 21, where a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* is

quoted. A more telling objection is that, even though the Orphic undertone of the canto is sad enough, Dante the pilgrim has not in fact followed a eucatastrophic course, that he has been getting steadily better, rather than worse, throughout the story: but to say so is to forget that in Canto I of *Inferno*, Dante was "ruining down" to his destruction. *Purgatorio* XXX is eucatastrophic in that it is the final moment, the instant of achievement, which results from a 63-canto-long strophe: like an aircraft carrier, Dante the pilgrim has such great momentum that it takes a vast space to reverse his course, even though there is a single instant in which the process is complete. Indeed, even in Canto XXX he is only back at the general and individual beginning: the moment of his eucatastrophe is achieved in Eden, exactly in the place of our universal catastrophe, and, as Beatrice points out (ll. 121-123), this will be the second time she has given Dante, as an individual, a start toward "the right goal."

The fact that *Purgatorio* XXX is set in Paradise underscores the point Tolkien makes in his epilogue: if eucatastrophe narratives in general are types of the Gospel, then this episode is the archetype among types, because the "good" of this eucatastrophe, the voice that breaks into grief to call the pilgrim by name, is the voice of the god-bearing image, as Charles Williams would say. For the pilgrim, at this point in his life, to turn from the lost Virgil back to Beatrice — who has been welcomed with the mass text *Benedictus qui venit*, and pictured as the center of the Corpus Christi pageant — is to turn back to God incarnate. That one use of "Dante" calls the pilgrim from Orphic loss to Christian hope.

Tolkien's lecture, then, at the very least provides in "eucatastrophe" a term that may be better suited in our age than "comedy" to express Dante's contrast between his own "commedia" and Virgil's "tragedia." And lest it seem overly meticulous to look for such a word when "comedy" is both at hand and sanctioned by centuries of use as the title of the poem, it may be worth noting that we do not generally adopt Dante's classification of Virgil's poem as "tragedy": the *Aeneid* may be "tragic," but we still prefer to call it an "epic." So it may be helpful (if polysyllabic) from time to time to set "eucatastrophic comedy" against "tragic epic" when we try to contrast Dante and his master. Beyond this clarification of genre, however, if we allow the eucatastrophe to persuade us to look at the *Commedia* as a fairy-story, we find that other parts of the poem are thrown into relief.

Most striking of these corollaries is Tolkien's insistence that a truth-claim is essential to Fantasy's production of Sub-creation. Whereas Dante commentator Charles Singleton observes that "the fiction of the fiction is that is that it is not fiction," Tolkien would argue that "the achievement of this fiction is not to seem a fiction," that such an achievement is a gesture pointing toward God in a way consistent with the larger aim of the poem, and that for Dante to achieve such a thing is the supreme expression of his human nature as a subcreator, the sustained triumph of the uniquely privileged form of human art.

Recovery and Escape also have roles to play in the

Commedia: or rather a role. For it is precisely the point of the story to have Dante the pilgrim (and thus the reader) so recover a proper vision of the world that he will escape from it. At the beginning of the poem's action (described in *Inferno* II, 99 *et seq.*), it is St. Lucy, the patroness of those with afflicted sight, who acts as the messenger from the Blessed Virgin to Beatrice. Dante sees that the human race has been given that deathlessness for which it always longed, but he also learns the fairy-story lesson that deathlessness in itself can be, even for Virgil, a torture: and he sees, we see, how to escape that torture — see it, in this moment, in the figure of Beatrice, and, in the end, in a flash beyond the power of fantasy, in an Enchantment of Love which draws him and us into the Primary Reality. ☞

Notes

1. *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine - Cantica II Purgatory*. New York, Penguin (1955), p. 308.
2. As early as *Inferno* I, 121-126, where the transition is first adumbrated:
To which glad places, a worthier spirit than I / Must lead thy steps, if thou desire to come, / With whom I'll leave thee then, and say good-bye; / For the Emperor of that high Imperium / Wills not that I, once rebel to his crown, / Into that city of His should lead men home." [Sayers, ...*Cantica I Hell*... (1949), p.74]
3. e.g., *Inferno* IV, 76-78; XIII, 52-54; XV, 85; *Purgatorio* XXI, 85.
4. p. 285. Curiously, Beatrice is not explicitly invoked in *Inferno* XVI, where Dante is particularly terrified. She may be represented by some sort of sequence involving Geryon (Fraud incarnate) and the Siren (who defrauds by accepting the projection of Dante's own fantasies), as contrasted with her own, "We are, we are, Beatrice"; or the mysterious business of the cord with which Dante meant to restrain the Leopard of incontinent desire may have some sort of reference to the woman whom (in however courtly a sense) Dante desired.
5. One could argue that Dante is in fact an Orpheus who regains his Eurydice as well as a Knight who rescues his Lady, in the sense that what he really quested for was self-knowledge; but despite Virgil's figurative crowning and mitring — or rather precisely because of them, as sacramental acts — I think that it would be wrong to conflate the inner grace of what Dante the pilgrim learns with the outward signs of what happens to him.
6. *The Tolkien Reader*, New York: Ballantine 1966), p. 52.
7. Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins, *The Harper Handbook to Literature*, Cambridge: Harper and Row (1985), p. 10.
8. This is probably the point at which to note that Tolkien has been quoted as condemning Dante's "petty relations with petty people in petty cities," a remark he made to interviewers from the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*. His posthumously published *Letters* show Tolkien responding to a draft copy of the interview:
My reference to Dante was outrageous. I do not seriously dream of being measured against Dante, a supreme poet. At one time Lewis and I used to read him to one another. I was for awhile a member of the Oxford Dante Society (I think at the proposal of [C.S.] Lewis, who overestimated greatly my scholarship in Dante or Italian generally). It remains true that I found the 'pettiness' that I spoke of a sad blemish in places.
The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, selected and edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1981), p. 377.

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- . "On Fairy-stories" in *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine, 1966.

Notes to Lewis and Barfield. (continued from page 19)

7. *What Coleridge Thought*, pp. 79-80. One could argue that Barfield interpreted Coleridge in the most radical sense possible. R.J. Reilly, for example, in the chapter on Barfield in his *Romantic Religion: A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1972) takes a more "traditional" stance, i.e. Coleridge merely held that "by means of the Primary Imagination we 'create' the phenomenal world by our unconscious structuring of the Kantian noumena" (p. 26). Barfield's view is more radical in that there seems to be nothing but phenomena (or "collective representations"); the "noumena" do not exist. No physical reality stands behind the phenomena, only something that could be called the "collective unconscious" (SA, 153-154). Elsewhere Barfield said, "Nature unperceived is the unconscious, sleeping being of humanity; just as Nature perceived is the self-reflection of waking humanity" (RCA, 210).
8. Morality for Lewis was not intrinsically superior to other modes of the spiritual life, but was "pre-emptive" because it is concerned with action. Many have tried to trace Lewis' emphasis on morality to his Christian beliefs. But Lewis had placed morality as one of the highest modes of the spiritual life well before his Christian conversion. His acknowledged master in this area was Kant, not Christian revelation. Lewis stated in Part II of his *Summa* that a sound theory of ethics, such as Kant's, implied the metaphysics he had presented in Part I.
9. A recent edition is Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1966).
10. See my article, "Knowing and Being in C.S. Lewis' 'Great War' with Owen Barfield," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society*, 169 (Nov. 1983), 1-8.
10. See my article, "Knowing and Being in C.S. Lewis' 'Great War' with Owen Barfield," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society*, 169 (Nov. 1983), 1-8.
11. *Letters*, p. 89. After his conversion, Lewis pointed out that he had begun with no "belief in a future life". "I now number it among my greatest mercies that I was permitted for several months, perhaps for a year, to know God and to attempt obedience without even raising that question... I have never seen how a preoccupation with that subject at the outset could fail to corrupt the whole thing" (*Sbj*, 231).
12. Lewis seems to have never lost his belief that this was true. In his "Is Theology Poetry?", published in 1945, Lewis said, "In a certain sense we spoil a mythology for imaginative purposes by believing in it" (*WG*, 77). By this time, however, he could caution against going too far. A believed mythology was spoiled only "in a certain sense", not in all senses. He admitted that many things we enjoy depend on their supposed reality in order to achieve their effect on us. Nonetheless, the kind of pleasure received is different.
13. Symptomatic of the fundamental problems in his argument, Lewis' distinction between Art and Imagination cannot be maintained. Earlier in Part II, Lewis claimed that Art is only an "image" of the spiritual life because the objects of Art are not "real", and often are mere "subjective fancies" (Sec. viii). But in the concluding sections of Part II "subjective fantasies" have been made legitimate objects for Imagination, although they or their associated metaphors still are denied "reality" (Sec. xx).
14. The "Great War" letters were for the most part written before the *Summa* and the tractates that followed. However, the main point of disagreement in the letters only appears at the end of the *Summa*. Therefore, our examination of the "Great War" letters has been left till after our examination of Lewis' view of Being and Imagination in the *Summa*. This is perfectly consistent with Lewis' own opinion that metaphysics (the question of Being) is primary.



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