

ABSTRACT

Fantasy and the Scriptural Imagination

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Christians are surrounded by a surplus of imaginative stimuli, yet the majority are unaware of the rich theological tradition of the imagination in Christian scholarship. Many Christians who earnestly desire to glorify God with their minds and the meditations of their hearts hold unnecessary trepidation toward fiction, especially in the mode of fantasy. Drawing from texts by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Edmund Gosse, I aim to demonstrate why Christians should invest in intentional cultivation of scriptural imagination. By tracing the scholarship of scriptural imagination from the church fathers all the way to Tolkien, I will develop the position that it is not only possible but desirable for Christians to engage fantasy fiction for the benefit of their hearts, souls, and minds. I also offer reassurance to wary readers by laying to rest a few of the most central Christian concerns regarding the fantasy genre.

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FANTASY AND THE SCRIPTURAL IMAGINATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	iii
Chapter One: Introducing the Scriptural Imagination	12
Chapter Two: Fantasy and the Scriptural Imagination	23
Chapter Three: Responses to Common Criticisms	31
Conclusion	42
Bibliography	47

INTRODUCTION

I first read Tolkien's creation myth when I was not-quite-fourteen years old. To this day I hold that those first ten pages are some of the most beautiful I have ever read. More astonishing than the beauty of the words, however, was what the words did to me. They awoke in me the conviction that stories expand and enrich the imagination; that my extant passion for stories was *not* mere child's play; that these tales brushed against something higher, deeper, *more*. The *more* that I sensed was spiritual reality – the reality of God shining through. I sensed then, and I believe now, that it is good for Christians to exercise their imaginations with fiction.

The years between twelve and sixteen, as I suspect is intolerably common, were a dark time in my life. That is to say, they were the years when darkness was oppressively present in my awareness for the first time. They were lonely years, and thoughtful ones. I will forever be grateful that I had already learned how to find solace in worlds outside our own. And so, perhaps a few months shy of my fourteenth birthday, I climbed the bookshelf in my bedroom to fetch down *The Silmarillion*.

It was a proud, intimidating book. Its spine was stiff and tall, and its star-jeweled dust cover so immaculate and beautiful that I hesitated. Not because of its size; I had read plenty of long books, including *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy a few years before, and even *Tales from the Perilous Realm*. I was less intimidated by the dragon on the *Perilous* dust cover than by the serene, skyward-looking figures on *The Silmarillion*.

But I was lonely - and hungry. I did not crave distraction, or I would have resorted to the reliable method of re-reading favorite passages from the volumes stacked two-deep

on the lower shelves beside my bed. No, I had already had my fill of distraction. I needed spiritual grounding. I reached for Tolkien.

“There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought. . . .”¹ I watched, entranced, as Illúvatar unveiled his plan to the Ainur and felt that I, too, could hear the great music. The elegant lines of the myth transported me beyond myself. I couldn’t move. I hardly breathed. When I finally reached the end “amidst the innumerable stars”, I blinked.² Sunlight blazed through my bedroom window, its angle unchanged. I stared at it in a daze. Had it really been as short a time as that? *Something* had shifted. Something important. My heart did circles in my throat. I felt I had just been entrusted with a precious truth, not lightly shared. Compelled by the insistent familiarity tugging at my lungs, I reached for the Bible on my nightstand. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. . . .”³

Genesis one. Genesis one, two, and *three*. I devoured them – or they devoured me. I sat and read as I had never read them before. This time when I reached the end, there was no hesitation. I picked up *The Silmarillion* again. “There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar. . . .” When I emerged from the pages this time, the light had shifted upward against the wall.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001; 15.

² Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 22.

³ The Bible, Gen. 1:2, New King James Version.

I stared out the window again. I read some more. I thumbed back to the beginning to read the preface. There was *truth* here, exciting and fresh and old and frightening all at once. But how?

When I picked up my Bible to read Genesis, I was instinctively reaching for Truth against which to authenticate the truthfulness I had sensed from the *Ainulindalë*. The sort of deep, tingling conviction I experienced while reading Tolkien's creation myth resonated on a frequency I had never felt outside of scripture. No, that's not quite right – I *had* felt similarly about works like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Tower of Geburah*.⁴ I had encountered pockets of the same feeling in various other places and poems, but none that had so overpowered me. And, I think, my attunement to such divine reflectiveness in stories increased after reading the *Ainulindalë*.

To this day I think the *Ainulindalë* is one of the most beautiful things I have ever read. But what is the reason behind its lasting effect on my life? How can I say I experienced 'divine reflection'? I believe that my experience that day opened my eyes to an apprehension of how myth images truth. I had not yet read about Tolkien's discussion with Lewis on Addison's Walk. I had not yet read any of their essays or any of their writings outside of those previously named. But I intuited Tolkien's belief in the power of story from the power he reflected there.

For at least a few years, I assumed that the majority of Christians understood the power of story to inspire and deepen their faith. The only reason I did *not* believe that Christians were universally on that same page was because of my acquaintance with a

⁴ John White, *The Tower of Geburah: A Children's Fantasy*, Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1978.

certain circle of rather strict fantasy-averse mothers. The more I raised the question of Christians reading fantasy authors like Tolkien in conversation, the more I came to the surprising realization that many Christians were suspicious of – if not outright hostile towards – any sort of fiction with the flavor of the fantastic. Of the authors who have written in defense of Christian fantasy or fairy tale, those I could find at that age were the very same who were mistrusted by the people I wanted to convince: Tolkien, Lewis, MacDonald.

When I read St. Augustine's *Confessions* for the first time, I was captivated by his descriptions of the *Aeneid*. When I read how he wept for Dido and was thrilled by the Greek poets, I thought I had found a supporter among the early church fathers. Instead, I was surprised to see Augustine condemn the art form that had awakened his soul and stirred it to grief. Augustine was disgusted with himself because he wept for Dido's sins without recognizing his own; to me, it always seemed like he began to come awake to the bleak reality of sin and its corruption when he recognized it in the tragedy of Virgil's tale.

I am not here to argue with Augustine; I am grateful to him for having galvanized me to pursue in earnest the question of whether Christians can healthfully engage with fiction. It rattled me to see an authority such as Augustine condemn stories as an art form or form of entertainment. Ironically, various writings of Augustine's – which I will touch on in a later chapter – were of great assistance to me in developing my position, even while his staunch denial of my thesis compelled me to widen my lens.⁵ That my work

⁵ Only later would I encounter Dr. Foley's excellent analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* in light of his employment of "the Academic art of concealment", according to which Augustine is likely to have appreciated the value of the literary arts far more than he let on to general audiences; see Michael Foley.

continually circled around to Tolkien (and Lewis, and others of their circle) was less surprising. My broader search, however, led me through Aristotle, Von Balthazar, and Dante, and also to the more surprising company kept in this thesis: Bonhoeffer, Buechner, and Gosse.

I contend that it is *good* for Christians to exercise their imaginations by reading, writing, and enjoying fiction, and that the genre called ‘fantasy’ or ‘fairy tale’ is especially well-suited for this work. In the ensuing chapters, I will demonstrate the immense benefits of cultivating Christian imaginations through stories; then, I will make a case for the suitability of fantasy worlds like that of J.R.R. Tolkien for this project; and finally, I will respond to common Christian arguments against fantasy as encapsulated by John Goldthwaite’s attempted critique of Tolkien in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*.

Caveats and Clarifications

Limiting the Question

Unfortunately, there must be significant limitations on the scope of the question explored in this thesis. I want to demonstrate that it is possible for Christians to read or write fantasy-fiction without harming their spiritual life, and, in fact, to derive spiritual growth from the experience. To do so, a thorough discussion of Christian imagination is of central importance. I am not, however, writing a comprehensive theological analysis of the imagination.

Terms: Imagination

The word ‘imagination’ will make frequent appearances throughout this thesis. Many of the sources examined in the body of this text engage the imagination in the tradition begun by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge’s famous conception of the imagination considers it as two functions, “either primary, or secondary”, with the primary imagination being “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”⁶ Most notably, this definition ascribes great theological significance to the ability to form images in the mind.⁷ Coleridge believed “the true roots of poetic inspiration” to be found “in the narratives of the Bible”, and extrapolated that “If God is the ultimate guarantor of reality”, then therefore “the medium by which we make that leap is the “imagination””.⁸ For Coleridge, then, the imagination is that uniquely human gift that “lifts the raw material of sense data from the mundane level of the Understanding to the rarified reaches of Reason by means of symbols” and therefore allows the development of most important aspects of human life, including the furtherance of one’s relationship with God.⁹

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 1:202; original emphasis; Qtd in Stephen Prickett, “Backing Into the Future”, Jeffrey, David Lyle, Daniel H. Williams, and Phillip J. Donnelly, eds. 2014, *Transformations in Biblical Literary Traditions: Incarnation, Narrative, and Ethics: Essays in Honor of David Lyle Jeffrey*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press. 96-110.

⁷ The importance of this ability is also emphasized by Augustine.

⁸ Stephen Prickett, “Backing Into the Future”, 104.

⁹ Stephen Prickett, “Backing Into the Future”, 103.

Coleridge goes on to describe the second facet in his diagram of the imagination: “The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation.”¹⁰ Stephen Prickett sums up the critical ramifications of applying this definition to a Christian discussion of imagination:

This is at once an aesthetic, a political, and a theological point. When the artist or poet shares with his less gifted fellow mortals, what they encounter when they read his or her work is not so much the shock of the new, as *recognition* – a discovery of something already embryonic within them. If, on the one hand, this harks back to Plato and his recognition theory of knowledge, it also has a theological parallel: encountering a great work of art (say, *Hamlet*) is like the Christian convert discovering that the Kingdom of God is already within him.¹¹

Coleridge’s definition of the imagination draws a connection between the nature of the imagination as a means of making higher-order leaps of reason and the nature of the arts which abstract and distill truths in order to present them as touchpoints for those leaps. Coleridge’s definition, therefore, lends itself to recognition of the power stories exhibit to transform minds. The final facet of Coleridge’s definition describes imagination as “a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space”, and emphasizes its creative capacity for absorbing abstracted truths from stories and reintroducing them into chains of reasoning and the like.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Prickett, “Backing Into the Future”. 104.

¹¹ Prickett, “Baking Into the Future”, 105

Coleridge's definition and analysis of the imagination – its abilities, purposes, and potential – establish the sense in which I will be discussing imagination throughout this thesis. All subsequent sources on the imagination align with this understanding of the subject, making Coleridge's definition the most apt for the purposes of this thesis.

Terms: Storytelling

My aim in this thesis is not to take apart any one genre or medium of storytelling. For much of the first half especially I will examine the concept of stories and their theoretical influence rather than any particular tale. Stories belong to the arts; art by its beauty, can draw people toward goodness and truth. Story telling as an art can take many forms. For the purposes of this thesis, I do not distinguish between the effects of literature and the effects of television dramas, or between any other possible mode of storytelling because I want to examine the abstract concept of story and its relevance to Christian theological practice. To avoid confusion, I will primarily refer to stories as being heard or read, but there is no significance intended by the interchanging of these terms.

Terms: Fantasy

At its core, this thesis is a defense of that genre of fiction often called fantasy; it attempts to demonstrate for doubtful readers that true fantasy stories represent opportunities for spiritual formation. For my definition of what constitutes true fantasy, I have relied on Tolkien's excellent essay, "On Fairy Stories".¹²

In a section devoted to refining his definition of the term "fantasy", Tolkien

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, and Alan Lee, *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, "On Fairy Stories", London: HarperCollins, 2008, 315-400.

sketches an outline of the imagination that closely parallels that of Coleridge. Tolkien agrees that “The faculty of conceiving the [mental] images is (or was) naturally called Imagination”, but he objects to what he sees as a misapplication of the term “imagination” to “the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality.”¹³ Tolkien distinguishes between “The mental power of image-making”, which “should appropriately be called Imagination”, and the high degree of control necessary to bring stories to life so vividly that they become “Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation.”¹⁴ In order to write about the unique qualities of what he called “fairy-story”, Tolkien found he required a word which embraced “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.”¹⁵ This specific quality – fiction with internal consistency believable enough to qualify as sub-creation, and strange enough to inspire an indefinable awe and curiosity – is what Tolkien dubs “Fantasy,” and this is the intended meaning of “fantasy” as used in this thesis. Both Lewis and Tolkien primarily use “fairy tale” to refer to stories within this understanding of fantasy; due to the importance of their work and terminology to my argument, I may occasionally substitute “fairy tale” where it seems most appropriate to convey my meaning, but the two terms should be understood to be basically interchangeable in this context.

¹³ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”, 363.

¹⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”, 363.

¹⁵ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”, 363.

CHAPTER 1

Introducing the Scriptural Imagination

On the Importance of Imagination to the Christian

One surprising place I found support for my line of questioning was in the prologue to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters & Papers from Prison*. In the section so titled, Bonhoeffer ponders the nature of sympathy and its role in Christian life:

We must allow for the fact that most people learn wisdom only by personal experience. This explains, first, why so few people are capable of taking precautions in advance... Secondly, it explains their insensibility to the sufferings of others; sympathy grows in proportion to the fear of approaching disaster.¹

Bonhoeffer here asserts that people rarely develop sympathy sans experience because it is human nature to learn primarily by experience. As a disaster approaches, however, people's imaginations begin to spark images fueled by fear. Bonhoeffer observes that people seem woefully incapable of imagining themselves in the position of the victims of a disaster that is not right on top of them, and draws a subtle correlation between this absent ability and the expression of sympathy.

Bonhoeffer acknowledges that, without cultivating Christ-like sympathy, people can remain outwardly functional and sufficiently courteous to satisfy the world at large: "Psychologically, our lack of imagination, of sensitivity, and of mental alertness is balanced by a steady composure, an ability to go on working, and a great capacity for

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and E. Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, A Touchstone Book, Touchstone, 1997, 13.

suffering”.² Note, however, that to experience suffering does not guarantee the development of sympathy. Rather, Bonhoeffer notes “imagination” and “sensitivity” as the missing ingredients for the development of proper Christian “large-heartedness”.³

Bonhoeffer appears to use “large-heartedness” to indicate depth of genuine feeling, not charitable actions or good works alone. This aligns with Christ’s teachings concerning the workings of the heart and sin. If harboring anger or hatred toward your brother holds the same sinfulness as murdering him, then it follows that we should both refrain from murder and endeavor to nullify wicked desires⁴. But the solution is not neutrality; it is goodness. To show kindness to your brother is also better than indifference, but to show kindness without kind or charitable feelings is hollow as charitable feelings without action are shallow. To attain the total opposite of murderous action *and* the murderous sin of rage, one must do the good work while genuinely desiring to do so. Bonhoeffer rejects complacent worldly attitudes toward sympathy and instead asserts its necessity to living as a Christian: “if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ’s large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing real sympathy.”⁵ Expanding our imaginations is necessary to the Christian practice of “large-heartedness” because by practicing sympathetic imagination – placing ourselves in another person’s or character’s shoes – we exercise empathy. Empathy, properly utilized, incites the sort of ‘action-

² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 13.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 13.

⁴ Matthew 5:22, NKJV.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 13.

backed-by-genuine-feeling’ that Bonhoeffer speculates should characterize Christian sympathy.⁶

Reading empathetically can help us avoid the “very real danger of our drifting into an attitude of contempt for humanity”.⁷ Bonhoeffer writes that one thought which “may keep us from such a temptation” is that “Nothing we despise in the other man is entirely absent from ourselves”.⁸ The immersion of the self by imagination into stories is uniquely suited to present this reminder. Hearing a story often engages us in a level of care that surpasses sympathy to grip the heart with empathetic emotion; in such a scenario, people may feel the storyteller’s joy or pain as though it were their own.⁹ Scholars like Jonathan Cohen call this *identification*.¹⁰ Books especially can immerse us in the thoughts, attitudes, perspectives, and overall internal life of another person; through them we recognize something “[not] entirely absent from ourselves”, and thus

⁶ When Bonhoeffer recorded these observations, he was in prison because he had participated in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Even before his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question of what it meant to follow Christ in a society where the meaning of terms such as “German Christian” were inside out. In this section of the *Letters and Papers*, Bonhoeffer is carefully unfolding the assumptions behind what it means to love one’s neighbor *as oneself* in fulfillment of the great commandment. The role of the imagination here is to enable the ‘as’; if you have lost the ‘as’, the analogous character of the command is lost.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9-10.

⁹ Jonathan Cohen, “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters”, *Mass Communication and Society* 4.3 (2001): 245–264. Web.

¹⁰ Jonathan Cohen. “Defining Identification”, 245–264.

expand both our comprehension of and empathy for others without having directly lived those experiences ourselves.

When we forget how to engage stories – whether historical accounts or the differently true stories of the imagination – we are in danger of forgetting how to engage our hearts. A deliberate suppression of the story-telling instinct, therefore, cannot help but have deleterious effects. According to Edmund Gosse, author of acclaimed nineteenth-century autobiography *Father and Son*, a person who stifles imaginative thought must also stifle sympathy:

My Father's inconsistencies of perception seem to me to have been the result of a curious irregularity of equipment. Taking for granted, as he did, the absolute integrity of the Scriptures, and applying to them his trained scientific spirit, he contrived to stifle with a deplorable success alike the function of the imagination, the sense of moral justice, and his own deep and instinctive tenderness of heart.¹¹

There are at least two important dimensions to the observations Gosse makes about his father's spiritual calcification: the cause and the effect, or, to put it another way, the disorder and the symptoms. Gosse Sr. was a protestant minister and a devoted naturalist¹² in the late eighteenth-hundreds. The reason Gosse Sr. begins to 'stifle the imagination' is that he is afraid. In the eighteen-sixties, the advent of evolutionary theory presented seemingly irreconcilable challenges to his understanding of scripture that were especially

¹¹ Gosse, Edmund. *Father and Son*. 169; Gosse seems to be drawing from the tradition regarding 'imagination' that owes its roots to Coleridge, as discussed in the introduction.

¹² Philip Gosse was well respected in his field for his guidebooks and illustrations of salt-water tide pool organisms.

painful for a devoted naturalist like himself. This was the disordered emotional state that motivated Gosse Sr. to intellectually disengage and to become less and less tolerant of any text that was not scriptural in origin. Ironically, his desperate refusal to reckon with the tension between his religious beliefs and scientific studies resulted in increasing “inconsistencies of perception” and decay of the integrity he was trying to uphold:

Both of my parents, I think, were devoid of sympathetic imagination; in my Father, I am sure, it was singularly absent. Hence, although their faith was so strenuous that many persons might have called it fanatical, there was no mysticism about them. They went rather to the opposite extreme, to the cultivation of a rigid and iconoclastic literalness.”¹³

What caused Gosse Sr. such harm was not reaching a conclusion one way or another on a scientific matter; the problem was that he did not *reach* a conclusion at all. Instead, he hunkered down where he was, drawing the shutters and refusing to contemplate this frightening new idea. If he had been open to contemplation – had imagined the ramifications of the theory, envisioned it in his mind’s eye, turned it over and over in consideration – perhaps he would have been able to either retain or reform his beliefs without such loss of character. When Gosse Sr. closed off his imaginative faculties, he became less capable of sympathizing with others. The stricter he became in his forbidding of fiction, the less patience and kindness he exhibited toward his parishioners. The patterns of behavior observed by Gosse Jr. display the exact symptoms we would expect to occur based on Bonhoeffer’s assessment. In this view, Gosse’s father and his

¹³ Gosse, Edmund. *Father and Son*. 41.

father's flock both suffered from the loss of his "large-heartedness" as a direct result of his starved imagination.¹⁴

This phenomenon occurs both backwards and forwards: people who, like Gosse, intentionally starve the imagination, will find their sense of sympathy also malnourished, while people who intentionally harden their hearts to suffering and compassion will find the deep stories sterile and inaccessible to them. Therefore, another result of starving the Christian imagination is a diminished capacity to engage with God's word.

The cultivated faculty of imagination, then, serves at least two important functions in the reading of scripture: humility and preparation. There is real danger in taking for granted the absolute integrity of our own interpretations of scripture. That danger can be mitigated by the exercise of the imagination through good fiction because, in order to immerse ourselves in a fictional world, we have to set aside our preconceptions. We must, in essence, humble ourselves before we can enter. For my understanding of how imagination helps prepare us to read scripture, I am indebted to Charles Taylor for introducing me to the concept of the social imaginary.¹⁵ The term 'social imaginary' refers to the fact that there are bounds on what it is possible for someone to imagine based on the preconceptions and foundational perspectives of their time and culture.¹⁶ These boundaries, however, can be moved. By studying the social

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 13.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹⁶ Philip Gosse, for instance, could not have conceived of a world created the way Charles Darwin introduced in *On the Origin of Species*. By contrast, most people alive today can easily imagine the world as we know it being shaped by evolution, regardless of what they believe.

imaginaries of other times, other places, or other cultures, for instance, students are introduced to new ways of looking at the world. To truly change one's social imaginary, however, takes an intentional exercise of the imagination. Analogously, Christians can examine and expand their socio-spiritual imaginary by intentionally exercising their imaginations with stories. Potential benefits include developing Christian "large-heartedness" toward those most alien to us, and cultivating humility as we recognize how much we truly do not understand about life. When we allow ourselves to be touched by stories, we enrich our capacity to imagine that which is true, good, and beautiful; to understand why – and furthermore, why the myth or fairy tale is especially potent at this work – it will be helpful to have a more definitive picture of the imagination and its elements.

On the Qualities and Applications of Scriptural Imagination

Interestingly enough, St. Augustine was again helpful here. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine offers advice on the reading, interpretation, and presentation of scripture. He methodically delineates differing concerns, making it easier to categorize the manners in which we approach scripture, the myriad of ways those approaches can go wrong, and therefore also how the imagination is at play in successfully navigating said approaches. Incidentally, Augustine's avenues of approach tend to align with the concerns shared by Bonhoeffer and Gosse.

From an intellectual perspective, Augustine seems to agree that a certain humility is called for, and that expanding the mind's horizons through observation and study is advisable before interpreting scripture for oneself. In chapter one of book three,

Augustine discusses the importance of humility, asserting that a Christian is better equipped to interpret scripture “when he has become meek through piety”.¹⁷ In chapter eleven of book two, Augustine talks about scriptural use of metaphors and the value of acquiring a wide knowledge base in order to interpret them.¹⁸ His most salient remarks, however, come when Augustine acknowledges the role of beauty in winning people for the gospel.

In a section titled, “The hearer must be moved as well as instructed”,¹⁹ Augustine explains that it is often necessary to win people to the gospel not solely by delivery of the facts, but by the beauty of its presentation²⁰. Given his apparent public stance on the literature of his time, it might seem that Augustine leaves unresolved tension between his argument concerning aesthetic attraction as a means of drawing people into the faith and his attitude toward the art of storytelling (or toward any of the arts besides rhetoric, as this passage does specifically discuss eloquent diction). In actuality, Dr. Michael Foley’s research provides compelling evidence that Augustine believed stories to be powerful – so powerful that they should be handled with caution and reverence. Here lies the impetus behind Augustine writing the *Confessions*: to perform this alternative function of literature, to move his readers as well as instruct them, so that they might also be

¹⁷ Augustine, transl. D. W. Robertson. *On Christian Doctrine*. New York: Liberal Arts Press, n.d. Book 3.1.

¹⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. 2.11.

¹⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. 4.13.

²⁰ Thereby establishing grounds from which to build toward the arguments of Bonhoeffer and Gosse, that intellectual and emotional growth precipitate or at least nourish spiritual growth.

transformed by an encounter with a literary work.²¹ The fact that the seeds of an argument for cultivating scriptural imagination, however incomplete, trace all the way back to Augustine stands as potential support for the work of Christian literary artists like Tolkien.

Regarding scriptural imagination, the final key passage to note from *On Christian Doctrine* comes in the fifth chapter of the third book, in which Augustine condemns the carnally-oriented stagnation of the imagination that disallows figurative understanding and starves the soul:

And nothing is more fittingly called the death of the soul than when that in it which raises it above the brutes, the intelligence namely, is put in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter... Now it is surely a miserable slavery of the soul... to be unable to lift the eye of the mind above what is corporeal and created, that it may drink in eternal light.²²

This passage confirms the idea that Augustine did see humankind's creative, imaginative faculty as essential, not merely an auxiliary factor, in experiencing divine grace. For Augustine, the imaginative faculty was part of the "eye of the mind", which among other things gives humans their ability to produce mental images. While he did not phrase it identically or emphasize the exact same points as Coleridge, Augustine also believed that the ability to form mental images, to abstract symbols, and to therefore make leaps of

²¹ Michael Foley, "St. Augustine: *The Confessions*", *Finding a Common Thread: Reading Great Texts from Homer to O'Connor*, Edited by Robert C. Roberts, Scott H. Moore, and Donald D. Schmeltekopf, South Bend, Ind: St. Augustine's Press, 2013, 81-97.

²² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.5

reason between them was crucial to understanding theological truths. Therefore, the imagination was also crucial in the opposite direction: to recognize how abstract ideas relate and apply to the particulars encountered in everyday life. This is why Augustine further describes the “blind adherence to the letter” that kills the soul as an absence of the human ability to decipher figurative meaning from texts and to find analogous meaning in our circumstances:²³

For he who follows the letter takes figurative words as if they were proper, and does not carry out what is indicated by a proper word into its secondary signification; but, if he hears of the Sabbath, for example, thinks of nothing but the one day out of seven which recurs in constant succession; and when he hears of a sacrifice, does not carry his thoughts beyond the customary offerings of victims from the flock, and of the fruits of the earth.²⁴

While Augustine may be working from a definition of the imagination that is slightly different than is familiar today, it can be clearly understood that Augustine believed that Christians’ pursuit of virtue (specially humility), their powers of emotion and their powers of intellect best flourish when creativity thrives and the mind is teachable. All of these qualities – involving the affections and the intellect – are aspects of a fertile imagination. Furthermore, Augustine passionately asserts the importance of being able to “lift the eye of the mind above what is corporeal”. By this he seems to indicate that the imaging (or ‘imagining’) faculty must be exercised or stretched in order to attain to

²³ There is a fruitful parallel here between Augustine and Gosse, who describes his parents’ “rigid and iconoclastic literalness”.

²⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.5.

“eternal light”. While he writes at length about methods for strengthening the intellect and the will, however, Augustine does not furnish readers of this text with instructions for strengthening their imaginations.²⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edmund Gosse, and St. Augustine all demonstrate the exigency of Christians cultivating their imaginations. Both Bonhoeffer and Gosse attest that the imaginative faculty is necessary in order for Christians to engage fully scripture’s moral teachings and to develop sympathy. Gosse’s account suggests fiction as a way to keep the imagination fed, and as a possible remedy for the intellectual hubris that produces unteachable people with calcified imaginations. Augustine clarified how imagination pertains to the Christian discipline of reading scripture and, repulsed by stale, unthinking interpreters, affirmed the urgency of anointing the mind, through the imagination, with divine light. When their imagination is weak, Christians are less likely to extend Christ-like sympathy; they become entrenched in unexamined mindsets; and their hearts are numbed to the grandeur of God. But how exactly does fiction, and fantasy in particular, proffer safeguards against each of these pitfalls?

The next section will demonstrate why fiction, especially that genre known as fantasy or fairy tale, is so well-suited to exercise precisely those functions of the imaginative mind that are valuable to Christian practice.

²⁵ As has been partially demonstrated, this Augustinian position anticipates what will be revisited and more fully unfolded in the work of in the work of people like Coleridge.

CHAPTER 2

Fantasy and the Scriptural Imagination

A long history of Christian thought affirms the beneficence of cultivating the imagination for assistance in properly orienting the soul's desires toward God, humbling and therefore expanding the intellect, and opening the eyes of the mind to difficult truths. The question remains: in what unique ways does fantasy cultivate the imagination to the benefit of Christian virtue? Fantasy is able to prepare its readers to experience a deeper understanding of the gospel by first invoking a desire only truly satisfied by external, eternal truth; by circumnavigating pride in order to deliver its messages directly to the heart; and by opening our eyes to truths about ourselves and our world.

Awakening Desire

What Augustine calls raising “the eye of the mind”, Charles Taylor might call expanding the imaginary.¹ Augustine meant specifically the expansion or elevation of the mind in order to look upon divine truth. Taylor uses the notion of a “social imaginary” to refer to those boundaries on what a group of people are capable of imagining for themselves, and therefore any broadening of the mind that enables someone to imagine something truly new would be an expansion of that imaginary.² The type of work being done by each depiction is analogous and helpful in different ways. C.S. Lewis offers a third illustration:

¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.5; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

² While Charles Taylor utilizes the term “social imaginary”, I am here concerned with the experience of the individual reader before it becomes a widely known or shared social imaginary.

our imaginations can be, “in a certain sense, baptized”.³ I propose that the function of fantasy in cultivating the imagination most closely resembles Lewis’ description.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is supposed to have said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea”.⁴ For C.S. Lewis, a fantasy novel by George MacDonald took him quite by surprise when it instilled in him this sort of endless longing.⁵ Much later in life, Lewis would look back on his experience with that novel as being critically important in his conversion to Christianity.⁶ The profound impact of *Phantastes* on Lewis had nothing to do with convincing him intellectually that it is true that God is real and has revealed himself to humans, and everything to do with making Lewis *want* to believe – if not in Christianity, at least in something equally transcendent. His conversion was not instantaneous, and his path would wind some before he arrived, but now he was on the path. His internal compass had been fundamentally re-attuned to something like “spiritual north.” Young C.S. Lewis was now “longing for the endless immensity” of “he knows not what”.⁷

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, the Christian philosopher, James K. A. Smith, makes a case for incorporating study of aesthetics into theology and worship

³ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, A Harvest Book, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1984, 181.

⁴ qtd. in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What you Love*. 91.

⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. Chapter 11.

⁶ George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*.

⁷ qtd. In James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*. 91; Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*. 29.

based on the underlying truth illustrated by Expur y’s aphorism: “we act *toward* what we long for, and... we long for what has captured our imagination”.⁸ Therefore, if you want to grow closer to God, train your will to desire his presence and your actions will soon follow. This argument complements Augustine’s view of the intellect while addressing his reservations regarding fiction by directing the emotional impact of storytelling toward a beneficial spiritual goal. Augustine may have been disturbed by the reality of aesthetic response within himself, but his observations align with Smith’s when he writes, “Our imaginations are aesthetic organs. Our hearts are like stringed instruments that are plucked by story, poetry, metaphor, images...”⁹ With this understanding, it should come as no surprise that “Stories capture our imagination and teach us to long for the endless immensity of God.”¹⁰

This capturing of the imagination does more than induce some pleasant feelings: it sparks the latent desire for God in every soul, so that the soul truly aches for its home “as the deer pants for the water”.¹¹ C.S. Lewis writes of the sensation in *Of Other Worlds*: “fairy land arouses in [the reader] a longing for he knows not what”.¹² Elsewhere in the same collection of essays, Lewis contemplates why the fairy tale seems to produce more poignant desire in its audience than other genres of fiction. One plausible reason involves the elements of ‘wish-fulfillment’ present in most satisfying works of fiction:

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*. 91.

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*. 91.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*. 91.

¹¹ Ps. 42:1, New King James Version.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, 29.

There is no doubt that [fairy-tales and fictional tales in everyday settings] both arouse, and imaginatively satisfy, wishes. We long to go through the looking glass, to reach fairy land. We also long to be the immensely popular and successful schoolboy or schoolgirl, or the lucky boy or girl who discovers the spy's plot or rides the horse that none of the cowboys can manage. But the two longings are very different. The second, especially when directed on something so close as school life, is ravenous and deadly serious. Its fulfillment on the level of imagination is in very truth compensatory: we run to it from the disappointments and humiliations of the real world: it sends us back to the real world undividedly discontented.¹³

The desires stirred up by stories set in our own backyards are almost inevitably earthlier and more selfishly motivated than those evoked by authors of true fantasy:

The boy reading the school story of the type I have in mind desires success and is unhappy (once the book is over) because he can't get it: The boy reading the fairy tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. For his mind has not been concentrated on himself, as it often is in the more realistic story.¹⁴

The defining differentiation, then, between the effect of stories that can be categorized as fantasy or fairy-tale and the effects typical of other fiction, is in the quality of the longing induce. Depictions of victory in the schoolyard or on the battlefield are "all flattery to the ego", while the form of the fairy-tale necessarily introduces cosmic, supernatural

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children", 29.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, "On Stories", 38.

mysteries that evoke longing for “eternal light”.¹⁵ Lewis describes the reader of fairy tales as “happy in the very fact of desiring”; this pining for something far off, this bittersweet, overwhelming, seemingly unquenchable desire is like a precursor or training ground to the awakening of the soul to God. Hence Lewis’ assertion: “there are two kinds of longing. The one is *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease.”¹⁶ The stretching of the soul’s desires – delicious in its rightness, and uncomfortable because of our fallenness – that Lewis refers to as spiritual exercise is naturally encountered in fantasy because, as he explains:

Fairy land arouses a longing for he [the reader] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing.¹⁷

Experiencing this otherworldly yearning could be, as it was for Lewis, a vital step toward seeking and finding new ways to view this world and its greatest questions. The longing itself may open our eyes to consider spiritual realities or disciplines previously left neglected. In other words, when fantasy stirs this “special kind of longing” in us, it expands our spiritual imaginary.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, 29; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.5.

¹⁶ Lewis, “On Stories”, 38.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, 29.

Slipping Past Pride

Part of the reason stories are able to affect us so deeply and so well is that they slip past our defenses. A person holding desperately to a pride that is causing them harm will not hear any criticism directed at them or their particular situation. This same person when reading a novel, however, may be unguarded in their love for and identification with its characters. The struggles, choices, and consequences those characters experience often illuminate the reader's own because they allow for recognition and conviction scaling the walls of pride rather than assaulting them directly.¹⁸

Lewis thought that this effect is particularly potent when it comes in the artistic form of the fairy tale because fairy tales not only circumvent the barrier of pride, they lower the barriers of formality, over-familiarity, or whatever everyday reality has made one afraid to approach divine realities.

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for

¹⁸ The prophet Nathan used this tactic to great effect with King David.

the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons?”¹⁹

Heightening Awareness of Truth

Stories, and especially those that take place in fantastical realms, admit a sort of abstraction that distils truths from their particular circumstances. This allows readers to confront and contemplate these truths – and their responses to them – more clearly.²⁰ The monks of St. Gregory’s, writing on Lewis’ ‘baptism of the imagination’, puts it this way:

An imaginary world must show us what kind of world it is, and in so doing, it makes us ask ourselves what kind of universe we live in. Lewis’ imagination was baptized by MacDonald’s novel because, in the end, he saw in Fairyland a reflection of what is true about our world. It is possible, of course, that some fantasy stories might not baptize the imagination in the same way as MacDonald’s did. In a way, fantasy worlds are thought experiments that allow us to try other worlds on for size to see what rings good and true about our world.²¹

When a story takes place in a world separate from our own, it puts us off our guard emotionally and ideologically. Regular fiction in a realistic mode does not provide the necessary prerequisite of “An imaginary world”; therefore, fantasy is the fictional genre

¹⁹ Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 40.

²⁰ James W. Menzies, *True Myth: C.S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on the Veracity of Christianity*, 3.

²¹ From *Come Let Us Adore*, a collection of articles and photos published by the monks of St. Gregory’s Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan. Individual authors of each article are left anonymous.

best suited for elevating the mind, disarming pride, and unfolding truth.²² All true fantasy has these potentialities, but the ideal model of fantasy applied for *askesis* is the sub-created world that springs from an imagination already baptized by scripture. Learning to perceive this baptism allows Christians to distinguish between the imagination in general and the scriptural imagination which they should strive to cultivate.

²² Some readers may rightly object that a number of stories in the science-fiction genre take place in other worlds, so why have I not included them in my analysis? I would contend that some stories popularly designated ‘science-fiction’ really ought to be considered fantasy, according to the definition set out by Tolkien. *Star Wars* is a prime example.

CHAPTER 3

Responses to Common Criticisms

Scriptural imagination, then, is the imagination as applied to and shaped by scripture. A well-cultivated scriptural imagination wears its eternal yearning with joy, patiently seeking out yet another morsel of the divine goodness that inspires its thirst; submits itself with humble curiosity (but also keen discernment) to the labors of engaging a new literary teacher; and readily discerns fruitful connections between the shape or morality of a fairy tale and biblical teachings. Yet a great many honestly devoted Christians are wary of fantasy because it appears to them *too* fantastical, too close to pagan myth to be safe for Christian consumption, or perhaps because they misunderstand the motive of Christian fantasy authors with a drive to sub-create. Thanks to their popularity and longevity, Tolkien's Middle-earth stories have attracted enough of both admiration and admonishment to serve as a useful case study through which to answer these concerns.

People debating the worth of stories and their media is nothing new. All genres suffer their own detractors, but fantasy and fairy-tales do seem to attract an above-average level of controversy. As Lewis observed, "About once every hundred years some wiseacre gets up and tries to banish the fairy tale. Perhaps I had better say a few words in its defense."¹ In his book, *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, children's author John Goldthwaite attacks Tolkien's Middle-earth saga specifically on the grounds that it is contrary to Tolkien's Christian beliefs. As such, the issues he raises are highly relevant to a discussion of fantasy as a means of Christian spiritual formation. Three important

¹ Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children", 29.

categories emerge from Goldthwaite's critique: Tolkien's inclusion of pagan materials, the presence (or paucity) of grace, and the creation of secondary worlds.

On Whether Pagan Materials Are Admissible in a Christian Imagination

In chapter five of *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, John Goldthwaite expresses his incredulity at the idea "that grace would set a Christian to daydreaming of nature spirits, wizards, rings of power, and "gods of old" when these things are so often condemned in the Bible that no scholar could ever claim to be ignorant of the prohibitions against them."² It is unclear whether Goldthwaite believes that Christians should not acquaint themselves with ancient classical myths or German operas, or whether he is merely outraged by the inclusion of such pagan materials in the work of a Christian author.³ To Goldthwaite's credit, there is merit in being cautious around this subject. Tolkien's mythos, however, is far less pagan than it is Catholic. Tolkien was very clear about the divinity of Middle-earth being monotheistic, not a pantheon.⁴ The "gods of old" referenced by Goldthwaite are, to the residents of Middle-earth, divine servants who fill roles similar to those of saints in Roman Catholic tradition.

Assuming a solid argument could be made for the presence of purely pagan elements in *The Lord of the Rings* or its attached works, the earliest of Christian traditions

² John Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, Oxford University Press, 1996, 219.

³ Interestingly, Goldthwaite is much more amenable toward George MacDonald, for reasons left unexplained.

⁴ Tolkien, *Letters*, 259-260.

gives credence to the use of the unholy to open the door for people's understanding of the holy:

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you..."⁵

The concept of the unknown god was already familiar to Paul's audience, and he was able to use that pagan belief to pry their imaginations open a little wider, just wide enough for them to imagine one God above all other gods. Not only does Paul use pagan religious practice as a springboard for his sermon, he cites the pagan literature: "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"⁶ Even Augustine asserted that if the pagan philosophers "have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it."⁷ Augustine compares this salvage to the Israelites being commanded to plunder the Egyptians before the Exodus:

In the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of

⁵ Acts 17:22-23, NKJV; note that in Greece, 'poet' was a broad category of artist and included the closest equivalent to modern fiction authors.

⁶ Acts 17:28, NKJV; the apostle Paul is widely understood to be quoting the Greek playwright Epimenides.

⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40.

us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad.⁸

It is important to note that Augustine is writing here about the truths that can be found in pagan philosophy; he does not seem to be referring to pagan myth or stage plays. In view of Foley's discussion of the dangers and benefits of the liberal arts, we can understand why Augustine would recommend the philosophers without publically endorsing the mythographers: because he saw reading the mythographers as too much risk for most of his readers. Nevertheless, as Aristotle famously points out in the *Metaphysics*, "even a lover of myths is in a way a lover of wisdom".⁹ There is a deeper connection between myths and wisdom which Augustine does not develop, but which could arguably be implied from his work. With assistance from Lewis and Tolkien, I am developing that implication here.

Lewis and Tolkien would both agree that the Christian faith can rightfully claim the reflection of the Gospel wherever it can be found, as evidence of God sowing the seeds of the Gospel in all nations. Lewis also points to his own experience with encountering pantheism as a step on the way to accepting spiritual reality and, eventually,

⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. 982b20.

Christ.¹⁰ This was lead-up to the ‘baptism of the imagination’ enacted by MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. MacDonald’s work could anoint Lewis’ mind because MacDonald’s imagination had already been baptized by the gospel: “Lewis said his imagination was baptized by MacDonald’s novel, but MacDonald’s imagination was baptized by the Gospel. It is the imagination baptized by the Gospel that opens our eyes.”¹¹

Whether Fantasy Worlds Disregard the Grace of God

In this line of questioning, Goldthwaite is ambiguous. He first describes Tolkien as a “devout Roman Catholic” who “saw the world, paradoxically, as being devoid of grace”, and cites Tolkien’s creation of a “secondary world” as “a declaration that God’s creation is deficient”, and he thinks it is a grievous misstep on the part of a Christian author to “prefer” such an imaginary world.¹² Mr. Goldthwaite further accuses Middle-earth of being a “pre-Christian, antediluvian, pre-Edenic world”, which would seem to indicate that he espies a lack of Christian grace in the narratives of Tolkien’s mythos.¹³

Goldthwaite is ambiguous. He could mean that Tolkien creating an imaginary world at all implies that the grace present in God’s creation is insufficient, or he could mean that it is the sort of imaginary world Tolkien envisioned did not have the qualities of divine grace or redemptive narratives that would be expected of a Christian’s authorship.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 175.

¹¹ St. Gregory’s, *Come Let Us Adore*.

¹² Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, 219.

¹³ Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, 219.

In either case, one wonders if Mr. Goldthwaite ever read Tolkien's legendarium with any serious consideration. Surely if he had, he would have been aware of the tales of the fall of Numenor, that ancient civilization of man that descended into wickedness and perished beneath the floods of the northern oceans. Or, indeed, of the land that once connected Middle Earth to the distant West, which suffered a similar fate and has lain beneath the sea ever since. 'Antediluvian' as a descriptor for Middle-earth is surely out of the question. Even if Goldthwaite's accusations were true, Tolkien's Arda is by no means devoid of divine Grace or redemption: "In *The Lord of the Rings*, the conflict" with Sauron is ultimately "about God, and his sole right to divine honour."¹⁴

Stories are not perfect because they are fantasy as opposed to another genre. To think all fantasy equally safe and edifying would be foolish, but to accuse the entire body of fantasy literature of being 'worlds without grace' would be equally so. Regardless, as discussed in chapter two, fantasy worlds without Christian moral structure or some concept of a benevolent cosmic deity would serve to show us by their contrast "what kind of universe we live in", which ought to be appreciated.¹⁵ Clearly, it is not true that Tolkien wrote his escape to Middle-earth because he sees our world as being "devoid of grace." "The fairytale world is one of darkness, and so is the Gospel world," but that does

¹⁴ Tolkien, *Letters*, 260; Dr. Ralph Wood's book, *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, explores in greater detail the multitudinous ways that Tolkien incorporates Christian themes of unmerited grace, redemption, free will, fall, moral formation, and many more into every level of his storytelling. Most relevant to this project, however, is the simple fact that these narratives exist in Tolkien's work.

¹⁵ St. Gregory's, *Come Let Us Adore*.

not mean it is devoid of grace¹⁶. On the contrary, Tolkien derives the grace of his world *from* this one and from his faith:

The Lord of the Rings suggest Divine Providence through the ministry of the magician Gandalf, but more important to this epic is the providential shape of the story as a whole. It is not Frodo who successfully fulfills the anti-quest of destroying the Ring of Power; it is Divine Providence using the loathsome Gollum that accomplishes it.¹⁷

Gandalf's situation is not an isolated instance; fantasy-fiction is ripe with examples of such characters. "Such tales suggest that we live in a friendly universe where grace from a higher source is available."¹⁸ This helps to dispel misunderstandings by detractors like Goldthwaite who believe that Tolkien had so given up on this world that "An abyss of time through which to work a deep enchantment had become [Tolkien's] *idée fixe*; if redemption were to be found, it would be found in the long ago, for the real world had none to offer."¹⁹

Aside from all of the factual problems with this accusation (the actual origins of Middle-earth, for instance), the idea that a Christian should never write anything that takes place in an ambiguous time period that at least feels a long time ago and very far

¹⁶ Frederick Buechner, quoted by Alan Jacobs in "The Witness of Literature: A Genealogical Sketch" p. 65 of *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol 17, No. 2, Summer 2015.

¹⁷ St. Gregory's, *Come Let Us Adore*.

¹⁸ St. Gregory's, *Come Let Us Adore*.

¹⁹ Goldthwaite, *Natural History*, 219.

away completely misses the point of fantasy.²⁰ The purpose of plunging into “the abyss of time” rather than the current, present place is like that of sheltering in Tom Bombadil’s house rather than waiting in the forest; for refreshment, and space enough to breathe that you might not find in the dark and twisted world. At times the darkness of the world becomes so overwhelming, so suffocating, that it seems impossible to reach God through its channels. If by stepping into a sub-created space we can meet with the grace of God and refresh our souls, then perhaps (as Aslan says in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*), we will learn to better recognize Him in this world.

You cannot return to this broken world with a determination to be salt and light to it without first having been ‘removed’ from it in some sense; why could not God, who created all things, all peoples, and all imaginations, inhabit the worlds and peoples those imaginations are populated with? And utilize them to draw us nearer to himself? To reveal Truth, and unveil it such a way that it gets *in* us, into our very being, and strengthens us for the remainder of our journey in the waking world? Long-established tradition assures us that God can do all sorts of miraculous things through the most unexpected of channels: unfaithful kings, pagan temples, mysterious dreams. Why should he not then do miracles of the heart through waking dreams as well? Would it not be more glorious and more fitting to His omnipotent grace to do real work on human souls through both these avenues, instead of only the one?

A Brief Note on the Meaning of Sub-Creation

²⁰ Tolkien, *Letters*, 257; When asked about his decision to set his mythic tales in an entirely separate world, Tolkien responded: “I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world... the theater of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary.”

Some Christians seem to find the idea of sub-creation unsettling. Like Goldthwaite, they believe that “Creating a Secondary World, after all, is in effect a declaration that God’s creation is deficient.”²¹ If this is true, then most fantasy stories would be utterly incompatible with Christian readers. It seems to me that when Goldthwaite writes that “Creating a Secondary World... is in effect a declaration that God’s creation is deficient”, he is making a baseless claim. One could just as easily argue that, if “read on his own terms”, Tolkien’s world-creating instinct should be interpreted as arising from an uncontainable love of God’s creation, as he indicates in his letters.²²

We differ entirely about the nature of the relation of sub-creation to Creation. I should have said that liberation ‘from the channels the creator is known to have used already’ is the fundamental function of ‘sub-creation’, a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety.²³

It is ironic that Goldthwaite’s fears over gracelessness in sub-creation miss the fact that grace is also the basis of Tolkien’s defense: that the human ability and right of sub-creation is a feature of the grace-filled world we inhabit as God’s children.

In essence, the substance of God’s creation was too great and magnificent for Tolkien to express in any way except to echo that creation. Even if one accedes to the accusation that the particular nature of the setting or creatures Tolkien chose to shape his world were in error, the basic instinct and intent behind their invention was not heretical. Rather, Tolkien was relying on the notion that the use of fantasy could be a good and

²¹ John Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Belive*. 219.

²² John Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Belive*. 219.

²³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, “To Peter Hastings”, 206.

formative thing rather than a corruptive thing; remember Lewis' comments on *askesis*. Tolkien's work suggests exactly that sort of spiritual formation through fantasy. Furthermore, Tolkien's goal was never to abandon or disdain the world we live in; he wrote that he "would claim", if he "did not think it presumptuous", to have "as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home'."²⁴ In other words, by employing a fantasy world for the setting of his story, Tolkien aims to steal past watchful dragons, to paint the troubles and delights of the real world in the abstract, and to thereby enrich the inner lives of his audience.

The creative power represented by fantasy is not to be taken lightly. Tolkien acknowledges that, like any power, "Great harm can be done... by this potent mode of 'myth' – especially willfully. The right to 'freedom' of the sub-creator is no guarantee among fallen men that it will not be used as wickedly as is Free Will", and he is wise to recognize it.²⁵ Tolkien believed his work to be on the right side of this free will exercise, and he was far from alone in this; he could almost have been responding to Goldthwaite when he wrote, "I am comforted by the fact that some, more pious and learned than I, have found nothing harmful in this Tale or its feignings as a 'myth'."²⁶

The realm of Middle-earth and all that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote of it has drawn the minds of many people upward in contemplation. I felt its pull when I read *The*

²⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*. "To Peter Hastings". 210

²⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*. "To Peter Hastings". 210

²⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*. "To Peter Hastings". 210

Silmarillion, and, like Lewis said, it has made everything it touches “a little enchanted”.²⁷ The unparalleled complexity and detail of Tolkien’s world-building makes it an outstanding representative of the fantasy genre, even more adept at slipping past people’s “watchful dragons”, and exceptionally well-suited as a backdrop for dramas reflecting truths about human conflicts, or love, or longing.

²⁷ Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 29; one could argue that Augustine felt a similar pull from the work of Virgil.

CONCLUSION

In the decades since Tolkien and Lewis published their thoughts on stories and the imagination, the popularity of fantasy as a genre has skyrocketed. *The Lord of the Rings* has now become a household name, and franchises like George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* have shaped entire generations. Some Christian families are understandably concerned about the influence these popular fictions may have on themselves or their children; it is wise to acknowledge that anything with the sort of power I have ascribed to stories can be perilous. Fear of fantasy itself, however, is unnecessary and possibly even detrimental. Christians should of course exercise discernment in how they spend their time and what they choose to fill their minds. True fantasy, however, elevates the heart and mind, and many of today's fantasy authors have unwittingly inherited their conception of fantasy and the imagination from a long history of Christian thought. In her commencement address to the Harvard's graduating class of 2008, J.K. Rowling chose to inspire her audience to intentionally develop their imaginations. Her description of what the imagination is and what it does echo some familiar concepts:

Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation; in its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.¹

¹ J.K. Rowling, *Very Good Lives: The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of the Imagination*, 41.

We can now see how Rowling is articulating part of a long tradition concerning the imagination that traces its origins back to Coleridge, Augustine, and even Paul. A long line of Christian theologians and scholars have contributed to our understanding of the imagination as that faculty which allows us to miraculously conjure images in our mind's eye, or to perform mysterious and wonderful sub-creative acts. Writers like Bonhoeffer and Gosse help us to understand why cultivation of the imagination is so valuable for Christians. As James Menzies further explains,

Because some matters lie beyond the intellect, they frequently elude being understood in familiar terms and concepts. In order to address such matters, humanity turns to the imagination by which it can transcend statements and systems. In ways not easily understood, imagination is able to turn the mind away from thinking in categories and systems and, instead, enables one to conceptualize. Imagination allows one to think in terms of metaphors, images, pictures, and myths.²

Menzies gestures toward the qualities of the imagination that make it an ideal channel for expanding and cultivating scriptural imagination; my argument articulates the specific benefits one stands to gain by engaging fantasy with an eye to scriptural imagination. Augustine, Lewis, Buechner, and Tolkien explain how the tantalizing otherworldliness of fantasy stories provides unique opportunities for spiritual formation.

What does it look like, in practice, when imaginations are baptized by scripture and nurtured by stories? What would it look like for an entire community to have had

² James W. Menzies, *True Myth: C.S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on the Veracity of Christianity*, 3.

their imaginations and desires primed toward eternal truths, their prideful presumption of understanding checked, and their perception of reality made deeper? To those on the outside looking in, it may very likely look like foolishness.

Every semester, my friends and I play a game that we cannot win. The week of the event, a motley crew of students from my residential college wake at absurd hours, remain awake until more absurd hours, stake out common classrooms, and chase one another hollering across campus with balled up socks in our hands and bandanas on our heads.³

Every year the story is different and the same: an unknown virus spreading through a summer camp, a witch going about animating the undead, mysterious disappearances on a remote space colony. Most students start as the hapless humans, and all students end as part of the zombie horde. You cannot win. If a particularly clever player survives until Endgame, their prowess may be recognized in the shambly, informal awards ceremony held outside Alexander Hall by a crowd of exhausted students at midnight. But you cannot win. You can be remembered, commended, and admired, but you cannot win. Not by surviving, anyway.

You come closest to “winning” by completing the story. Much like life, the game loses its charm when people become obsessed with “winning.” These players may resort to distasteful subterfuge because they fear their fictional deaths, while others, when they realize they cannot be named victors, stop trying at all. These people have missed the point. The game is not about winning - every player will lose, and therefore no player

³ Humans versus Zombies is a tradition beloved by those in the HRC, not necessarily by those without.

really loses at all. When you play this game, you *will* die. But if you play it well – if you follow the story and fulfill your role in it, whether as a human hero charging into the hopeless Thursday night purge or as a zombie stalking your friends in the rain – the fixed end of the game becomes glorious freedom. Because even after you die, you're still in the game. You're still a part of the story, only a different part.

When a human is tagged by a zombie, they are summarily removed from the human group chat and ushered into the undead one. Each group receives tidbits of storyline from the game master in threads that only come together during the evening missions (crucial touch points in the storyline, and incidentally the most infamous site of slaughter). To experience the best parts, you have to show up for the worst. Many past players have confessed to having more fun as a part of the horde than as the human prey, because they can attend the storyline-significant missions without worry.

In this game, if you win at all, you win by dying. But you also win by being remembered. Current HRC residents have inherited a long chain of unwritten traditions for the game, an oral history of sorts strong enough to inspire re-enactments, a talent-show musical, and the HRC history project. People are drawn to the game by the chance to be a part of this ongoing story: the story of a bunch of nerds who still believe that stories are worth telling.

Storytelling is a part of being human. Stories unite us, divide us, and inform beliefs at the core of our identities. I believe that God is the Author and original Storyteller, and that part of creating us in His image was to impart a desire for Him and His truth; our stories consistently reflect that desire, even when we don't realize it. Being part of a story, even a strange and silly one concocted by sleep-deprived college students,

sparks desire and deep fulfillment – but to enjoy it, you have to lay down your pride, and gaze clear-eyed on the reality of the story’s end.

Why would anyone care to cultivate their imagination through fantasy, in particular? Because, as Bonhoeffer and Gosse indicate, imagination is essential for the exercise of Christian sympathy – or, as J.K. Rowling observes, empathy. Empathy is defined as the ability to share and understand the feelings of another. Like any ability, it can be used for good or evil. Better to cultivate a spiritually attuned imagination than to leave that part of our soul untouched by intentional formation.

I do not believe, as some have suggested, that the storytelling instinct is the result of an evolutionary advantage to those who have the forethought to predict Hamlet-esque fictional scenarios. Others have already responded better than I could with the reasons why this argument does not hold water. I do, however, think there is merit in recognizing that fiction allows us to explore and yes, even rehearse, emotional scenarios (as opposed to literal ones). While I am unlikely to be tasked with destroying the ring that holds the power of the dark lord, I may be – and in fact am very likely to be – at some point in my life asked to do something that seems impossibly difficult. As Christians especially, we must expect great sacrifice to be demanded of us. It comes with the territory. In this life, stories and especially fantasy give us great opportunity for personal formation if we submit ourselves to their lessons.

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