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## Tolkien's Sub-Creation and Secondary Worlds: Implications for a Robust Moral Psychology

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## Introduction

The great Dominican moral theologian, Servais Pinckaers (1995), argues that there are novelists capable of helping us “to rediscover truth’s riches and reintegrate them in moral theology” (p. 35). In his seminal work on Christian ethics, however, he only specifies one such author (Georges Bernanos) and offers no analysis of his works. In the same vein, the renowned contemporary American Protestant moral theologian, Stanley Hauerwas (1994), says that the novel is “a school of virtue” (p.53), and “an irreplaceable resource for training in moral virtue” (p. 31). Hauerwas provides a detailed sketch of some of Anthony Trollope’s works as exemplifying what he has in mind. Yet even Hauerwas only appeals to the novel as a sort of imaginative mirror, albeit perhaps a necessary mirror, of human life and action, arguing that such virtues as forgiveness are understood “only when they are depicted *through a narrative*” (Hauerwas, 1994, p. 53). Though Hauerwas’s account goes significantly further than Pinckaers’s, through the inclusion of detailed analysis of particular examples, it remains essentially empirical. There are demonstrable good effects of reading novels, Hauerwas would seem to say, so *read* them. What neither Pinckaers nor Hauerwas seems especially concerned to do is to show how good fiction does what it does, when goodness of some kind is brought about in the reader through the act of reading. As unsatisfying as these two limited accounts may be, they nevertheless demonstrate that eminent scholars across the theological spectrum recognize and increasingly give voice to the intuition that fiction, or in other words, story-telling, can bear importantly on our moral life.

While J. R. R. Tolkien would surely have agreed with both Pinckaers and Hauerwas about the power of the novel to form human character, he goes much further in his considerations of precisely how the human imagination functions through the event of fiction, on both the author’s and the reader’s part. In what follows, I shall argue that Tolkien’s theory of the relation between author and reader of fantasy deploys a provocative anthropology: to be human, Tolkien asserts, *is* to tell stories. Furthermore, I contend that Tolkien derives this anthropological conviction directly from Christian theology, namely, from the doctrine of *imago Dei*: the claim that man is made in the image of God. Properly understood and implemented, Tolkien’s theory indicates imagination’s power to dispose us to right moral action, in the course of natural human development, but at the same time within an eschatological trajectory, primordially orchestrated and constantly superintended by divine providence. In support of this claim, it will be useful initially, however cursorily, to situate Tolkien’s narrative theory against a wider background. Providing such a comparative context will help to illuminate one end of a bridge between Tolkien’s theory and the realm of moral psychology. Moreover, this bridge will gradually become discernible as the analogy between

two relationships: Reader-Author and Self-Other, or Neighbor, in Christian theological terms.<sup>1</sup> In order to build this bridge, however, it is necessary first to look somewhat closely at the principal work in which Tolkien sets down his theory. Consequently, having established a point of departure within the broad realm of literary theory, I shall undertake a careful analysis of Tolkien's argument in the essay entitled "On Fairy Stories."

### **Story-Telling as *Imitation*: Tolkien's Narrative Theory in Wider Perspective**

According to Aristotle (350 BCE/1984), all of the various kinds of poetry are "modes of imitation," differing from each other in "means, object or manner" of imitation (1447a15-18). Insofar as the objects Aristotle has in mind are "actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad" (1448a1-2), it is evident that one of the earliest systematic treatments of literary narrative, and still one of the most influential, identifies the depiction of moral action, whether good or bad, as central to the crafting of narrative. Prior even to his specification of object as moral action, however, is Aristotle's basic insight that narrative is *mimetic*, or imitative. Remarkably, this insight has stood the test of twenty-three centuries, no doubt with variation and qualification along the way, until Claude Lévi-Strauss, a thinker in many ways quite different from Aristotle, affirms imitation as fundamental to the human mind's activity of myth-making. Over against Aristotle's claim that artistic narrative imitates things (specifically, moral actions) in the world, however, Lévi-Strauss (1964) avers that the mind, in the process of myth-making, is "reduced to imitating itself as object" (p. 10). Curiously enough, *The Raw and the Cooked*, from which this quote is taken, was published in 1964, the same year that Tolkien published the last and fullest version of "On Fairy Stories." For Tolkien (1965), too, imitation is indispensable to his theory, but in a way otherwise almost diametrically opposed to the perspective of Lévi-Strauss. Whereas Lévi-Strauss (1964) grants Paul Ricoeur's (1992) assessment of his project as "Kantism [sic] without a transcendental subject" (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 11), hence envisioning the mind inexorably forced back onto itself as the only available object for imitation, Tolkien (1965) invokes the transcendental subject *par excellence*, God, as the principle upon which his whole narrative theory depends. In short, according to Tolkien (1965), human story-telling transpires first and foremost in imitation of God: we tell stories because God does and we are made in God's image, as unforgettably recorded in Genesis 1:26-27. Considering Lévi-Strauss's (1964) profound impact on Structuralism and the various later narratological schools to which it gave rise, either by embellishment or reaction, Tolkien's place as a narrative theorist in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century may be considered

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<sup>1</sup> A third analogous relationship to which I will have occasion to refer in passing is that between the analysand and the analyst.

somewhat unique, deriving as it does, essentially, from an ancient Judeo-Christian theological intuition.<sup>2</sup>

### **Tolkien's Notions of Sub-Creation, Secondary Belief and Imagination – on their own terms**

In 1939, J. R. R. Tolkien gave the tenth Andrew Lang Lecture, which he titled “Fairy Stories,” a lecture that Tolkien later expanded and published in essay form. *The Lord of the Rings* did not yet exist as such, but, as Tolkien (1965) later noted, “was beginning to unroll itself and to unfold prospects of labour and exploration in yet unknown country as daunting to me as to the hobbits” (p. vii).<sup>3</sup> Tolkien (1965) began his lecture as follows:

I propose to speak about fairy-stories, though I am aware that this is a rash adventure. Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. And overbold I may be accounted, for though I have been a lover of fairy-stories since I learned to read, and have at times thought about them, I have not studied them professionally. I have been hardly more than a wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the land, full of wonder but not of information. (p. 3).

However whimsical an opening chord seems here to have been struck, Tolkien nevertheless gets quickly down to business and declares his intention to attempt answers to three questions: What are fairy-stories? What is their origin? And finally, what is their use? Of greatest import for the current undertaking is Tolkien's detailed answer to his third question. Nevertheless, there are aspects of the earlier parts of Tolkien's presentation which are indispensable for a thorough

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<sup>2</sup> While there is no evidence that Tolkien read Lévi-Strauss's (1964) *The Raw and the Cooked*, he is much concerned with myth, particularly with respect to its complex relationship with folktales. In marked contrast with Lévi-Strauss (1964), who isolates *mythemes* as the elemental, and consequently universal, building blocks of all particular myths, Tolkien (1964) endorses the position of George Webbe Dasent that “we must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled” (as cited by Tolkien, 1965, p. 19). Terry Eagleton's (1983) discussion of Structuralism in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* is illuminating both for its account of Lévi-Strauss's significance and for providing a striking backdrop against which Tolkien's remarkably dissimilar thought can be compared.

<sup>3</sup> “The Introductory Note in *Tree and Leaf* was Tolkien's brief preface to his expanded version of the original lecture, published in 1947 as the essay “On Fairy Stories.” The original edition of this work was published in London by Allen and Unwin in 1964. All of my citations are from the American edition, published the following year.

appreciation of what follows and so some account should be taken of what Tolkien has to say about the *nature* of fairy-stories and how they came to be.

### *The Nature of Fairy Stories*

For those not familiar with Tolkien's literary work, it may be surprising to discover how keen he is to insist that a thoroughgoing *realism*, albeit of a curious quality, pervades good fairy-stories. He is in fact irritated by notions of the fairy-story that emphasize *unreality* or *untruth*. A range of alternative notions might be effectively summed up by the phrase 'make-believe,' whether the operative narrative mechanism is that of dreams or otherwise. In such cases, the predicate "never really happened" or even "could not happen" is taken as essential to the idea of a fairy story. In contrast, Tolkien (1965) observes that:

Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, *when we are enchanted* [emphasis added]. (p. 9)

Leaving aside, for the moment, the precise meaning of the final qualifier, it may be said that Tolkien (1965) conceives fairy-stories as recognizably describing the real world, however re-envisioned through the enchanted veil enshrouding Faërie, "the realm or state in which fairies have their being" (p. 9).

To this fundamental characterization, should be added another, equally important for Tolkien: true fairy-stories, he urges, have a "strong moral element" (Tolkien, 1965, p.16). Indeed, he goes so far as to speak of "their inherent morality" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 16). What Tolkien means here is evidently that the kinds of stories he has in mind are ones in which human, rational, moral agency figures centrally. As such, fairy stories pertain as much to the human as to the fantastic, privileging the interplay of human moral agencies, against a background implicitly evocative of a transcendent Other, ordering and governing the world for the ultimate good of all. Whatever merely "natural" elements may feature in these stories, they are ancillary to the central anthropological dimension. Much less can Tolkien's notion of fairy story countenance nihilism, of the sort that becomes virtually inescapable when the story is "explained away" via "the machinery of dream" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 13). This inherent moral character is one of the keys to making sense of Tolkien's understanding of fairy-stories and fantasy, and crucial, by extension, to my own further investigations.

Lastly, concerning the nature of fairy-stories, there should be noted two more themes featuring prominently in Tolkien's account: human desire and magic or enchantment. In keeping with his well-attested Christian-Platonic convictions,

Tolkien's (1965) notion of fantasy is erotically driven: man's "primal 'desires,'" he says, "lie at the heart of Faërie" (p. 15). Bringing to bear at the same time both this and the other notion just named, Tolkien (1965) contends that "at least part of the *magic* that [the elves or fairies] wield for the good or evil of man is power to play on the desires of his body and his heart" (p. 8).

### *The Origins of Fairy Stories*

As for the origins of fairy-stories, Tolkien (1965) himself says he must "pass lightly over the question," for lack of expertise (presumably historical) (p. 20). Yet it is here, in delineating the elemental relationship between story-telling and human language, that Tolkien first introduces his extraordinary idea of *sub-creation*. "The incarnate mind, the tongue and the tale are in our world coeval," says Tolkien (1965, pp. 21-22). By the same power, then, whereby man names things and conceives [other] words to describe them, he invents stories, almost in the same motion. "New form is made," he declares, "Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator" (Tolkien, 1965, p.22). Though he does not at this point unpack an expression with once more conspicuously Christian-Platonic overtones, he is manifestly concerned to identify the human capacity in question as in some way genuinely *creative*, "the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy'" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 22). Whatever higher and prior act of creation this one stands *under* (*sub-*), it is "*sub-creation*, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation" [emphasis added] (Tolkien, 1965, p. 22). The suggestion here, in no uncertain terms, seems to be that in telling stories, human makers *bring into being things*, however elusive, through their deployment of "mere" words. But what is to be done with such mysterious, shimmering things? With that question, the heart of Tolkien's essay is reached. This is the question of *use*, which he now rephrases: "What, if any, are the values and functions of fairy-stories *now*?" [emphasis in the original] (Tolkien, 1965, p. 33).

### *The Use of Fairy Stories*

Tolkien embarks upon an explanation of the doctrine of sub-creation within a discussion of *children* as the typically presumed proper consumers – one might say "users" – of fairy-stories (Tolkien, 1965, p. 33).<sup>4</sup> At this point, he invokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase, "willing suspension of disbelief" as a working description of what Tolkien refers to as *literary belief* (as cited by Tolkien, 1965, pp. 36-37). However, Tolkien immediately disputes the adequacy

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien takes great issue with this presumption, grounded as he believes it to be, in a false sentimentalizing or romanticizing of children. For Tolkien, children are merely immature human beings, lacking the experience of adults, essentially because they have not lived as long. See Tolkien (1965), p. 34.

of Coleridge's description. "When the story-maker's art is good enough to produce" this sort of belief, says Tolkien (1965),

what really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.' He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.<sup>5</sup> The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (p. 37)

Whether or not he has given Coleridge a fair reading, it is clear that Tolkien is concerned not to underestimate the scope of the imagination's power as it is engaged in *the act of reading*. About this act, it is worth noting here what Paul Ricoeur (1992) has to say. In his late, great work *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur (1992) describes reading as

... at its best a struggle between two strategies, the *strategy of seduction* pursued by the author in the guise of a more or less trustworthy narrator, with the complicity of the "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge) that marks the entry into reading, and the *strategy of suspicion* pursued by the vigilant reader, who is not unaware of the fact that she brings the text to meaningfulness thanks to its lacunae, whether these be intended or not.... (p. 159, n. 23).

Clearly Ricoeur (1992) is more favorably disposed towards Coleridge's famous dictum. The ultimate question with which Ricoeur *and* Tolkien are here preoccupied, however, is the same: to what extent and in what ways is the reader affected by the act of reading (particularly, reading fiction)? In the final analysis, Ricoeur (1992) affirms and even defends "the possibility of applying literature to life" (p. 159, n. 23).<sup>6</sup> Yet he frets over Alasdair MacIntyre's account of "the narrative unity of a life," reminding us warily that "In my own treatment of the mimetic function of narrative, the break made by the entry of narrative into the sphere of fiction is taken so seriously that it becomes a very thorny problem to reconnect literature to life by means of reading" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 159).<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, in contrast with Ricoeur and arguably in theoretical accord with MacIntyre, does

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<sup>5</sup> Without, ordinarily, collapsing the primary into the secondary world and so falling into (pathological) delusion: see, e.g., Tolkien, 1965, pp. 48, 52.

<sup>6</sup> It would be difficult to imagine any other conclusion supporting some of the claims Ricoeur (1992) makes along the way. E.g.: "Characters, we will say, are themselves plots" (p. 143).

<sup>7</sup> For MacIntyre's discussion, see MacIntyre's (1981) *After Virtue*, pp. 190-209, *et passim*.

not fret. It is fair, of course, to note that Tolkien at this point has mainly concerned himself with the movement of the mind *into* the literary realm, not so much with the reconnection to life that so vexes Ricoeur, but Tolkien will get to that, too, in the end. For the present, the sub-creator's Secondary World requires some further attention in its own right.

One of the most striking aspects of Tolkien's account is that what inclines one to linger in the author's secondary world is not so much its believability – assessed in terms of correspondence to “real life” – but its *desirability*. Thus, the creator of the great Smaug says that as a child “I desired dragons with a profound desire” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 41). Were dragons true, or real? What mattered more was that “the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfír [‘the prince of all dragons’] was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 41). In other words, Tolkien (1965) subtly shifts the emphasis in his phenomenology of reading – at least the reading of fairy-tales – from reason to will, privileging desire over intellectual evaluation of existential truth-claims. Though more will have to be said about the later stages of Tolkien's argument, I have now assembled, I believe, the tools needed to build my “bridge”: the proposed parallel between the reader-author relationship in Tolkien's account and the relationship between the self and the other or neighbor in psychological and theological terms.

### **Implications of Tolkien's Scheme for Moral Psychology**

My analysis here begins with the commonplace intuition that everyone has a story to tell, or better, in terms more comprehensive and especially amenable to the post-modern climate, everyone is always about the business of telling his or her own story. We are, then, perforce the hearers or even “readers” of our neighbor's stories. My contention here is that Tolkien's notion of sub-creation, with its correlates of Primary and Secondary Worlds and Primary and Secondary Belief, can be deployed in service of moral psychology, particularly in light of categories ready to hand in Christian moral philosophy and theology. Furthermore, though a transparent mapping will not emerge from this analysis, even the disanalogies between the author-reader and other-self relationships are instructive.

The basic contours of the comparison in question are no doubt rather obvious: the author of fiction, and especially of fantasy, “makes a Secondary World,” one possessed, Tolkien (1965) later elaborates, of “the inner consistency of reality” (p. 46, 47, 48); the human person narrates his story, always intent (more or less consciously) on persuading others that his version of reality bears at the very least the mark of inner consistency. “If only you would enter into my world,” he seems to say to me, “you would find what I relate there to be true.” And so I find myself invited to “read” a life-story in progress, one replete with its



own laws and its own dragons; I am beckoned, tempted, cajoled, by the Other-as-Author, temporarily to let go my hold on the primary world – the real world, albeit only knowable to me through my own perceptions – in order to enter into the perspective and, limitedly, the experience of the Other.

All this is highly *romantic* and would appear congenial to the work of Heinz Kohut and more recently of David Klugman (2001) on empathy and intersubjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Klugman (2001) seeks to shore up and elaborate on Kohut's understanding of psychoanalytic empathy, first by delineating how intersubjectivity theory develops organically out of Kohut's thought. Secondly, and of particular interest for the current discussion, Klugman (2001) invokes the historical dialectic that arises out of the Enlightenment between Rationalism and Romanticism. Focusing on the thought of Coleridge, Klugman (2001) aims to demonstrate the importance of the imagination to intersubjectivity, especially as operative within the psychoanalytic relationship. When all is said and done, the notion of romantic empathy articulated by Klugman is roughly analogous to the reader's engaging of Secondary Belief in order to enter into the author's Secondary World. And yet Klugman's foundational embrace of Coleridge's epistemology is, to this author's mind, problematic, however useful when put intelligently at the disposal of the psychotherapeutic process. Though this profound issue offers intriguing avenues for more extensive exploration, it may at least be treated summarily here, by appeal to a few of the Christian categories invoked by Tolkien himself in connection to his theory of literary artifice, and by some further elaboration on those ideas.

Klugman's perspective offers, in point of fact, an interesting entrée into the last phase of the argument of this study, in virtue of the striking contrast between his and Tolkien's doctrines of human imagination. According to Klugman (2001), Coleridge and other Enlightenment philosophers came to champion the imagination as essentially compensatory in function: into the vacuum opened up by the gradual demise of metaphysics, imagination sallied forth, in essence substituting the fertility of the human *mind* for an increasingly ephemeral Great Chain of Being.<sup>9</sup> Reacting against the Cartesian doctrine of "irreducible duality between subjective experience and an objective external world" (Klugman, 2001, p. 692), Coleridge strove "to counteract the passive, mechanistic models of the mind that relied on Cartesian dualism" (Klugman, 2001, p. 693), insisting that the world in an important sense is "dependent on what we make of it" (Cavell, as cited by Klugman, 2001, p. 694). And what we make

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<sup>8</sup> References to Kohut's work are made in view of Klugman's interpretation here.

<sup>9</sup> Even still for Ricoeur (1992), the anxiety to avoid the charge of ontotheology is conspicuous in his deliberate bracketing of the datum of faith/revelation in *Oneself and Another* – this notwithstanding his lifelong commitment to [Protestant] Christian faith. See Ricoeur (1992), "Introduction."

of it Coleridge believed “depends on the role one assigns to imagination in one’s perception and ‘creation’ of the world” (Klugman, 2001, p. 694). The irony in all this painstaking elaboration of a theory of the imagination intended to rescue us from Cartesian dualism is the extent to which Coleridge (and by implication Klugman) effectively retains Descartes’s dualistic principle more or less intact: As with Kant, whose intervening influence on Coleridge is direct and explicit, human sense experience, filtered as it must always be through the categories, opens only the most tenuous and unreliable of portals across the subject-object divide.

For the Catholic Tolkien, on the other hand, things really *are*, and really are connected in the world outside our minds, neither created by, nor in any other way dependent on us for their existence: in a word, the Great Chain of Being, for the believing Catholic, and indeed according to the Church itself, continues happily to exist and has suffered no diminution before the onslaught of modern skepticism. As for the imagination and the related powers of Art and Fantasy<sup>10</sup> to which the Imagination is sub-ordered, these human faculties are divine gifts for seeing things as they are or ought to be, implanted in human nature by God himself for the betterment of man and of the world. Indeed, in accord with this dimension of his rich Catholic anthropology, Tolkien (1981) is able to speak, in a letter to his son, Christopher, of “Man, the story-teller” (pp. 100-101): story-telling is, Tolkien believes, part and parcel of our very nature as human beings.<sup>11</sup> The theological intuition here, however, runs even deeper: for the reason we are natural story-tellers is not mere arbitrary divine fiat. Rather, Tolkien cherishes the notion, congenial to St. Augustine and other great thinkers long before him, that God himself is a, or rather *the* great Artist and Story-teller, and since God saw fit to make man in his own image, it must needs follow that man, too, shall be a maker, an artist, and a maker of stories. This idea runs through Tolkien’s thought from at least the 1940s onward, its Christian contours already plainly evident in

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<sup>10</sup> Drawing together the threads of his own argument, Fantasy could be defined as that power which achieves “a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression” of the fairy-story, to which the sub-creator’s more fundamental art has given the inner consistency of reality. Cf. Ricoeur, 1992, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> In a critical essay called “The Storyteller”, Walter Benjamin (1936/1969) grounds the art of storytelling in “the ability to exchange experiences” (p. 83), and because he believes “the communicability of experience is decreasing” (p. 86), he perceives as inevitable “the decline of storytelling” (p. 87). If Benjamin (1936) were correct, this would be a lamentable state of affairs. Yet Tolkien’s (1965) view implicitly denies this possibility on ontological grounds. Benjamin’s (1936/1969) position here is the more curious, given his robustly metaphysical understanding of human language in his retelling of the biblical fall in “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (Benjamin, 1916/2004). On the other hand, Tolkien (1965) would almost certainly agree with Benjamin about the general decline of storytelling as a cultural and literary phenomenon. But to the extent that he granted such a decline, he would necessarily see it as a debasing of human nature itself.

the letter of November, 1944, cited above. In its most detailed and elegant expression, it majestically crowns the 1947 edition of “On Fairy Stories,” where it constitutes the dominant theme of the Epilogue.<sup>12</sup>

Pursuing this line of reasoning somewhat further, it could be argued that Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief” is, like his whole doctrine of imagination, a compensatory gesture, if not a subtle counsel of despair (as cited by Ricoeur, 1992, p. 159). In contrast, Tolkien’s (1965) doctrine of sub-creation is expressive of his deeply sacramental intuition – of the reality, not to mention intrinsic meaningfulness, of things. Indeed, the robustness of the reality of things outside the mind is such, Tolkien (1965) is convinced, that their translation into the world of Faërie loses far less than our enlightened sensibilities incline us to believe: “it holds water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (p. 9). Consequently, Tolkien’s literary theory, rooted in precisely that conviction regarding the reliability of Being which Kant, Coleridge, *et al* have reckoned untenable, grants him access to worlds deeper and richer than many the most fertile Modernized imagination can discover. Quite simply, Tolkien’s worlds are *more real*, because they depend on, rather than dissolving that Chain of Being the thinkers of first the Protestant Reformation and subsequently the Enlightenment called increasingly into question. Tolkien believes he is writing about real things in the world, not merely, or even mostly, mental things. To return briefly to Ricoeur (1992) and MacIntyre (1981), this same intellectual split could possibly account for Ricoeur’s anxiety on the one hand, and MacIntyre’s sangfroid on the other, when faced with the prospect so daunting to the modern philosophic mind of bringing literature to bear directly on life. Ricoeur cannot ultimately shake off the barren nominalist metaphysics of his Protestant sensibilities, whereas MacIntyre, the Catholic convert and student of Aquinas, has at his disposal the richest possible account in St. Thomas’s *Summa* of Being and Existence, an account still unfettered by modern epistemology, much less by the hermeneuts of suspicion.<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, if Tolkien’s Faërie is as densely real as I have tried to indicate here, then our own self-narratives and those of others are revealed, *a fortiori*, to be ‘thicker,’ denser, in a word, more real, than Coleridge’s compensatory suspension may be able to countenance, much less enter into.

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<sup>12</sup> For further consideration of Tolkien’s argument in the Epilogue, see the section “The Problem of Credulity,” below.

<sup>13</sup> The claim tentatively ventured here regarding the genealogy “nominalism-Protestant Reformation-Enlightenment” as the engine that evacuates classical metaphysics, tending to set a stark “either-or” in its place, is sufficiently common not to require further annotation. For anyone interested, however, a good retailing of this narrative is available in Pickstock, 1998.

Klugman's efforts to recover some of the power of human imagination in service of the empathetic therapeutic relationship are admirable, especially in view of what Klugman and others might consider overly rationalistic, if not occasionally scientific approaches of some strands of modern psychology and psychotherapy. Yet the interpersonal communication grounded in Tolkien's robust, old-fashioned metaphysics – when his conception of authorial communication is applied analogically to personal relations in general, but by all means including the psychoanalytic dyad – has the potential to excel Klugman's model in proportion as the real exceeds the ideal.

Where I have admittedly embellished Tolkien's account somewhat is in the proposal that man's inveterate story-telling must surely compass not only his detached literary fictions but his own most intimate self-narration. Granted, however, that the line of speculation I have opened up here is one almost certainly not intended by him, it is nevertheless ultimately defensible on grounds of his own Christian anthropology, as I have already suggested. Moreover, there is at least one striking hint of this trajectory in Tolkien's thought within his own discussion of the uses of fairy-stories. Under the heading of "Recovery," he writes: "[The trite or familiar things, including 'faces, and yet unique faces...'] have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them.... Creative fantasy... may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds" (Tolkien, 1965, pp. 57-58). Here Tolkien (1965) himself bridges the gap between the fictional secondary-world-notion and real-world relations between oneself and others. Given more time, both "recovery" and "escape" in Tolkien's schematization of the benefits of literary fantasy could be shown to have profound Christian theological correlates in interpersonal relations. For the present, it is sufficient to have shown that the proposal under consideration here is thoroughly congruent with, even nascent in, Tolkien's thought without ever being consciously entertained by him as a discrete application of his literary theory.

As I have already acknowledged, my proposal raises some interesting problems. Indeed, some of the most provocative aspects of the argument may well lie in the problems. And so, as I move towards my conclusion, I would like to take up two of these problems very briefly and attempt provisional and just-as-brief solutions.

### **The Problem of Empathy**

The first problem could be termed a problem of "empathy," the very notion at the heart of the psychoanalytic investigation considered above. Curiously enough, upon encountering such arguments within the fields of clinical psychology and

psychotherapy, the confessional Christian may seem at first to find herself in agreement with Kohut and Klugman's rationalist opponents. For if many clinicians today worry that "empathy" applied as therapy ultimately leaves both analyst and analysand floundering in a subjective sea, the approach is equally suspect from the point of view of the Christian commandment, which is simply – and sweepingly – to love one's neighbor, not to sympathize with him, much less to accord my Secondary Belief to his Secondary World. Indeed, from the perspective of moral philosophy one must surely take heed here of Max Scheler's (1954) warning that, "One of the gravest errors of almost the entire school of British moralists lies in their departure from Greek and Christian ethics in seeking to derive the facts of *love* and *hate* from fellow-feeling" (p. 140).<sup>14</sup>

As a preliminary answer to a complex question, I would first recall the eloquent appeal of the renowned Christian phenomenologist, Gabriel Marcel (1964) when he wrote:

It may also turn out that submerging oneself suddenly in the life of another person and being forced to see things through his eyes, is the only way of eliminating the self-obsession from which one has sought to free oneself. Alone, one cannot succeed in this, but the presence of the other person accomplishes this miracle, provided one gives one's consent to it and does not treat it as a simple intrusion – but as a reality (p. 51).<sup>15</sup>

Note Marcel's emphasis on *reality* as a legitimate, even the proper, description of the Other's life and experience. In addition, one should recall Tolkien's intriguing insistence on the inherent strong moral element of good fairy-stories: though the waters of the human psyche are dark and dangerous, I would like to suggest, putting together the insights of Marcel and Tolkien, that the attentive "Reader" may well risk – or, risk *well* – such a submersion, trusting, sometimes blindly, in the foundational goodness of created human nature that always in-forms his neighbor's life-story, no matter how twisted it may seem to have become in years of telling. Indeed, should the reader grant the "inherent morality" of "true" fairy stories, I would challenge him to honor the logic of my working analogy and ascribe such inherent morality, *prima facie*, to our fellow-human being's self-telling. If the presumptions behind such an ascription appear daunting, its fruit promises to be commensurately rich.

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<sup>14</sup> A generation later, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) builds his detailed critique of emotivism on the same fundamental intuition, though he does not cite Scheler (pp. 11-34).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also: "The proper function of the subject is to emerge from itself and realize itself primarily in the gift of oneself [and in the various forms of creativity]" (Marcel, 1964, p. 49).

In any case, such a spiritual – or for that matter, psychoanalytic – prescription as this line of reasoning entails appears to resonate strongly with the “intersubjectivity” endorsed by Klugman and others, notwithstanding the reservations expressed earlier concerning Klugman’s appropriation of Coleridge’s doctrine. If so, then once again one may discern the applicability of Tolkien’s scheme to the specialized context of the analyst-analysand relationship, as much as to the more general relation between any two persons. This way of thinking invites a further extraordinary Tolkienian insight: in the letter to which I have already referred, Tolkien (1981) reasons that “man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story” (p. 100). This suggests that entering willingly (with all proper provisos in place) into the lesser “moving stories” of our fellow men, may, by extension and participation in the one Great Story, told by the Divine Story-teller, constitute a co-redemptive activity, an expression of what amounts in Thomistic terms to the cooperative deployment of gratuitous grace, whereby we help each other to accomplish God’s providential design for all (Aquinas, 1948, I-II, q.111, a.1, c).

### **The Problem of Credulity**

I will note just one more problem, one at first blush more serious than that posed by empathy, but the solution to which would appear to be a further elaboration on what has just been said. The problem is this: the writer of fantasy knows he is writing fiction and intends such. The teller of his own life story, on the other hand, more or less believes in the truth of that story. In short, there typically exists a disparity between the two kinds of story-tellers in regard to their dispositions towards the truth-values of their respective stories. To be sure, both desire, one may even say *require*, their hearer’s belief in order to achieve what they intend in the telling. But whereas the good of that belief, when achieved, redounds to the additional good of the one who listens to the fantasy being told (in the form of entertainment, escape, edification, consolation, etc.), in the case of the teller of his own story the good of belief redounds only – by typical design – to himself: in a word, believing in our own stories, on the whole and most of the time, is fairly vital for psychic survival. As a result, the analogy to the fiction author’s Secondary World would appear to be severely jeopardized: whereas the writer of fantasy seeks to evoke only Secondary Belief from his reader, we ardently desire *Primary* Belief of our own stories and whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, plead for the same unconditioned belief of others. How does this significant incongruence between the two sides of our working comparison not embarrass or even disqualify my whole analogy?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Can the parallel be adjusted and so salvaged? *Ought* this to be done? How does the disanalogy differ between the teller/author and the hearer/reader’s perspectives? These questions, insofar as

It may be that the kernel of the solution to this problem – and it is not one for the faint of heart, but one that may in the end “cost not less than everything” (Eliot, 1943/2000) – lies precisely in Tolkien’s final move, in the Epilogue to his magisterial essay. There, Tolkien suddenly, as if without forethought, envisages the Christian Gospel as the one true fairy story. In this singular case, what might initially be encountered from within Tolkien’s typology as another secondary world (i.e., the stereoscopic narrative comprised by the four Gospels), proves to be primary with a vengeance: primary at a new level, for the fairy-story that God tells is the truest of all stories, whose Happy Ending is eternal life! Yet it is hardly self-evident how to square this claim with the vexing myriad of credulous self-story-tellers, all of whom persist in more or less believing their own stories, often heedless of the fact that one’s own story and the stories of others are mutually exclusive, much less integrable into any sort of coherent grand narrative. However, in service of a preliminary attempt to do so, I would urge a possible application of the rich philosophical insight of Robert Sokolowski, a leading exponent of the thought of Edmund Husserl. If for the sake of argument one grants Tolkien’s proposal to read the Gospel narrative as the one true fairy-story, told in all its grandeur by God Himself, then by extension the secondary worlds of all [human] story-tellers, ourselves and all others-to-ourselves, become what Sokolowski (1994) calls manifolds or “presentational dimensions” of the real world in motion towards its telos (p. 201). According to Sokolowski (1994), “presentational dimensions in being” are the “structures of intentionality,” including such modes of presentation as “naming and the nameable, viewing and the viewable, ... predication and the predicable,” etc. (p. 201). Moreover, among such dimensions of “disclosure” or presentation, Sokolowski (1994) also includes “intersubjective experience.” His argument at this point is highly suggestive in the present context and warrants fuller quotation:

As we experience things, we realize, with greater and greater finesse, that the things we experience are also given to other datives of manifestation, other centers of awareness. We gradually differentiate between our view on things and the views others have. It is not that we just become aware of other cognitive beings and differentiate ourselves from them; it is that the things we know take on a new dimension as we see them as also seeable by others. The child does not only recognize its mother; it also becomes aware that the things it sees are also seen by the mother. Things become enhanced in their viewability, in the manifold of ways in which they can be manifested. Their identity also becomes enhanced, since there is more identity to them when they are known to be seen from viewpoints other

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they warrant in-depth reflection and their own careful articulation, take us once more beyond the scope of the current, introductory endeavor.

than the one we have. We come to see this dimension of intersubjective presentability in them. (Sokolowski, 1994, p. 202)

Bringing together Sokolowski's insights with Tolkien's theological narratology, my own moral psychological analysis uncovers the possibility that the individual makers of sundry secondary worlds may gradually become collaborative sub-creators, their own stories ever more clearly belonging to the one, great story of the world. Furthermore, speaking in inadequate historical terms, this process does not take place strictly in the *present*, but proleptically, in eschatological anticipation of a perfected world not yet fully realized.

The systematic-theological speculation set forth here builds as I have suggested upon Robert Sokolowski's creative extrapolations from Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>17</sup> In the end, however, Tolkien (1977) supplies the pure, elven insight in *Ainulindalë*, his exquisite account of creation at the beginning of the posthumously published *Silmarillion*.<sup>18</sup> In that extraordinarily original embroidering on Christian Neoplatonic insight, the themes that make up Ilúvatar's cosmological symphony are unveiled to his angelic sub-creators as the myriad interwoven lives – stories – of his elder and younger Children, Elves and Men:

But when they were come into the Void, Ilúvatar said to them: 'Behold your Music!' And he showed to them a vision, giving to them sight where before was only hearing; and they saw a new World made visible before them, and it was globed amid the Void, and it was sustained therein, but was not of it. And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew. And when the Ainur had gazed for a while and were silent, Ilúvatar said again: 'Behold your Music!' This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added. And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory. (Tolkien, 1977, p. 17)

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<sup>17</sup> Sokolowski's (1994) discussion at pp. 200-205 is particularly relevant here, though I am indebted to the entire work, and to Sokolowski's thought in general, for my own ongoing efforts to describe the world accurately and so come to understand and articulate truth in compelling ways.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to mention – as *aficionados* will attest – the quite literal first-fooliating of Tolkien's thought along these lines in the story "Leaf by Niggle," which Tolkien deliberately published in tandem with "On Fairy Stories" in *Tree and Leaf*. For the reader familiar with Niggle's adventure, the numerous points of contact between this last passage of my argument and Tolkien's magnificent story will be plain to see.



As the angelic acts of sub-creation have been taken up into the one Creative Act of Ilúvatar, so are our stories being taken up and woven into the single, magnificent story of our Maker. And just as God incorporates even the discordant themes of the archangelic rebel, Melkor along with the rest, so even our bad intentions and acts, from the petty to the fiendish, will in the end constitute so many, mostly minute, episodes in the divine master-drama. In regard, then, to the problem of the disparities identified above, between the Author-Reader relation and the ordinary interpersonal human dyad, the solution suggested here amounts to a willingness to entertain the outrageous, very un-modern, fantasy of an ancient Metanarrative – or, to retain the musical metaphor, to attune ourselves to the mysterious super-sonic transposition into a higher key: as already proposed, we are deeply *involved*, seemingly willy-nilly and indubitably like-it-or-not, in each other's story-telling enterprises, each of which is only one passage or theme in the narrative that includes all others, the grandest and most beautiful Story of all. If, then, finally, one has somehow become earnestly so attuned, or is even willing so to entertain – if one so much as *desires* that the fond fancy of a grand cosmic fairy story with a joyous happy ending might turn out to be true, why would one opt, concertedly or systematically, for the way of Melkor?

There is, in fact, a way in which the erotics of Tolkien's theory, previously noted, may here provide yet another link between the reading of well-made fantasy and the mature engagement of interpersonal relationships. For the greatest desire of the reader is for the joy of the happy ending – what Tolkien (1965) terms *eucatastrophe*, “the sudden joyous ‘turn’” (p. 68). And *qua* “reader” himself, the author shares this desire. So, too, in point of fact, does every teller of his own unfolding life-story. Yet there is one further desire cherished by the author of fiction and entertained by all serious readers, namely, that perhaps someday, some “specially beautiful fairy-story,” crowned with the happiest of happy endings, might turn out to be “‘primarily’ true...” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 72). From the Christian perspective, the Gospel has turned out to be this story. But if the fairy-story of the gifted story-teller answers to the reader's primal desires, for truth as much as for dragons, may we not enter into each other's muddled, magical stories ardently desiring that they may increasingly become real, true, harmonious threads of the One Story, whose Happy Ending we await in hope?

## Conclusion

I should like to conclude with my own whimsical, and no doubt rather wistful, plea: quite simply, to read stories. In the closing pages of his epoch-making essay, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper (1952/1963) embraces the paradox of his own project in terms that find a strong parallel in Tolkien's prescription for

fairy-tales: Pieper (1952/1963) offers a philosophical diagnosis of the ills of our civilization and sketches a kind of antidote, but acknowledges that it is precisely the nature of philosophy *not* to be ordered to another [practical] end, and by extension, that true leisure cannot be acquired by setting out to acquire it, having recognized that it is what is so badly needed for the mending of our world.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Tolkien (1965) hints that we – adults – desperately *need* to read fantasy (fiction, etc.), and yet he is quite clear, paradoxically, that fantasy can only fulfill its inner meaning and destiny if it is engaged for its own sake, for the joy of reading, not *for the purpose of* consolation. “Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder, but to proceed on the appointed journey: that journey upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 44-45). No one can make a child grow up. This is surely one of the great wonders, at times seemingly tragic, of our strange human existence. But fairy-tales may help us to grow, and may help us to help our children and others to grow up as well. And if reading fairy stories teaches us to enter imaginatively into the experience of others and helps us to love them more as we arduously craft our own enchanted narratives, so much the better.

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<sup>19</sup> Thus, like the philosophical act itself: “Leisure cannot be achieved at all when it is sought as a means to an end, even though that end be ‘the salvation of Western civilization’” (Pieper, 1952/1962, p. 72).

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