

Fantasy and Escapism

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I have been asked to talk to you about the art of literary fantasy, dealing in particular with its underlying philosophy and with some charges that are often brought against it. At first this choice of subject alarmed me, not so much for my sake as for yours, because it seems to me that the problem of fantasy quickly opens into far more basic questions about the validity of the imagination and, indeed, about the nature and meaning of our lives.

I've observed before, in a talk some of you may have heard, that the taste for fantasy cannot, in my observation, be learned. The liking for fantasy - and the perception of its value - seems to be innate in certain children and adults. Those who have the taste rarely lose it; those who don't have it rarely learn it. I therefore assume that some of you are indifferent to fantasy, and I suspect from experience that a few of you loathe it with a passion. I'm sympathetic to this dislike, which has always interested me when I've encountered it. I think it rests on an intuitive perception of the importance of the questions involved. The person who loathes fantasy feels at a gut level that the way the fantasist *answers* these questions is wrong.

I am going to try to elucidate both the questions and the answers the fantasist implicitly—or, in the case of the more sophisticated practitioners, quite consciously—affirms. If you then disagree with my conclusions, I hope you'll still find useful the clarity we may together achieve.

As an art-form fantasy is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon epics far more than in the Graeco-Roman myths that form the other half of our inheritance. Perhaps this explains why its modern revival is limited, so far as I know, to the English-speaking world. Although a certain amount of conscious archaism plays its part, particularly in the work of Tolkien with its basis of philology and literary scholarship, it would be a mistake to represent contemporary fantasy as a revival of older art-forms by a process of artificial respiration. In English culture—and in European culture up to the end of the Middle Ages—fantasy was the chief expression of the folk imagination. Anonymous geniuses created the Arthurian cycle, the Song of Roland, the tales of Robin Hood. In courtly circles the troubadours developed—probably with a depth of religious

and philosophical symbolism which is now beyond our ability to recover—the cult of the Virgin Mary and the idea of romantic love. In doing so they created the vision of a natural world alive with numinous values—a vision which is basic to true fantasy.

The Elizabethans already looked back on the Middle Ages as a more credulous and yet more colourful time: Shakespeare's Oberon and Titania are already too tongue-in-cheek—too much the products of a sophisticated though graceful condescension—to represent true fantasy. By the reign of James I, men's perception of the *truly* fantastic had become so blunted that, while the dark fantasy of witchcraft flourished, Richard Corbet could lament in verse the disappearance of the fairies with their traditional rewards to the neat housewife:

Farewell, rewards and fairies,
 Good housewives now may say:
For now foul sluts in dairies
 Do fare as well as they.
And though they sweep their hearths no less
 Than maids were wont to do,
Yet who of late for cleanliness
 Finds sixpence in her shoe?...
Witness those rings and roundelays
 Of theirs, which yet remain,
Were footed in Queen Mary's days
 On many a grassy plain;
But since of late Elizabeth
 And later James came in,
They never danced on any heath
As when the time hath been.

"Fantasy" now meant fairies. The mystery which the great fantasy cycles—with their imagery of Grendel and Grail and quest, of holy war and mystic Rose—had always sought to evoke, now flourished unregarded, or corrupted as in the witch-cult. The so-called "Age of Reason" went even further and sought to deny the mystery and the dark side altogether—a denial which continued into Victorian days in the form of evolutionary optimism. It is a refusal of reality for which mankind has, in this century, paid a horrifying price.

Modern fantasy, then, is not an artificial revival of an outmoded art. It is an attempt to recover certain values, values which have not been taken with full seriousness in the West since before the rise of rationalism and of scientific materialism. It is natural, then—until modern fantasy develops its own idiom—that it should adopt the archaic terms in which these values were last expressed. So Tolkien, in an effort to express his passionate belief in human nobility, often adapts the English of the King James Bible. He has been mocked, I think unfairly, because this language is archaic. But it was the natural idiom of a world that still shared the values Tolkien seeks to restore; in condemning his

language one runs the risk of becoming entangled in a condemnation of his values.

Archaism, then, serves a function for contemporary writers of fantasy. But it is not essential, and if fantasy survives as a respectable form, I hope it will develop its own idiom. My own work is an effort in this direction, a fact which will be much clearer in future than it is from the books I have so far published.

The *danger* of archaism is that second-rate writers will mistake it for the substance of fantasy itself: and this we see happening all around us. This mistake is one basis of the "sword and sorcery" school of popular fantasy.

Let me just stop and say something about the "sword and sorcery" genre. It is not the main focus of this talk, because its writers observe the outer forms of fantasy while remaining indifferent to its inner values. Such books, however, provide a popular entertainment that has attracted much highbrow scorn, and this is too bad. It is a prime function of the novelist to entertain, and the novelist of ideas who despises this legitimate need does so at his peril. His work would be enriched, and his obligation to his public far more fully met, if he would put in the effort necessary to become an entertainer. One occasionally suspects the "serious" novelist of feeling that his genius is burden enough without catering to vile popular appetites. Fortunately, a novelist who feels this way will not get read. The hunger for entertainment is legitimate; the ability to fill it is a most potent tool in the hands of the teacher, and this also the novelist of ideas would do well to understand.

Let us return to our quick historical survey. During the nineteenth century there was a current of false fantasy, represented by fairies (such as Gilbert's Iolanthe), pixies, and other products of a degraded whimsy. There was also an attempt to recover the true Romantic values. (Fantasy is an aspect of Romanticism. Later I will attempt a partial definition of both). In painting, this movement took the form of pre-Raphaelitism; in literature, among other things, it took the form of the gradual turning for inspiration to Nordic culture, such as we find in the works of William Morris and George MacDonald.

In everyday life, the materialism and prosperity of the Victorian world also accompanied a surprising resurgence of belief in the reality of unseen forces. The dimension of mystery—formulated in orthodox terms by Cardinal Newman and others who turned to the Roman Catholic Church—sometimes made a less dignified re-entry by the back door, in the form of spiritualism and superstition. It was becoming evident that rationalistic materialism had left many questions unanswered. More, it was becoming obvious that people craved and demanded answers. If science could not provide them—and despite its pretensions it could not—then they would look elsewhere.

Evolutionary optimism—the conviction that Man, the lord of Nature, was slowly but surely progressing toward the establishment of a

perfect society — was blasted by two world wars and the dropping of the atom bomb. In many ways the postwar world has been one of intense insecurity. This is presently increasing, with no sign of how or whether it will end; but for people of my generation, the present mood is an unmasking of the truth that prosperity never concealed from us. We are children of the mushroom cloud, and there must have been many people who, like me, believed from childhood that they would not survive their twentieth year.

It is in terms of this insecurity that we must consider the emergence of twentieth-century fantasy. Tolkien himself survived both wars: as he movingly reminds us, by 1918 all but one of his best friends were dead. History has proven the inadequacy of the values followed by the West in recent times. Tolkien and his friends and imitators seek to discover, or recover, a set of values that will not, through its unreality, let us in for a second radical betrayal. They seek values which would be “a very present help in trouble” because founded in a *true* understanding of our nature and our relation to the world.

Let us look at the values held by the writers of fantasy. I wish to apply another much-degraded word, and make clear that I consider these to be *Romantic* values. If I am arguing the worth of fantasy I am also arguing the worth of Romanticism. The word “romance” has popularly come to mean a pleasant, colourful, comforting lie — a lax abuse of the imagination. This denigration of Romance springs from a deeply mistaken value-system, as I hope to show.

Modern fantasy, then, promotes a Romantic world-view which goes something like this. Man in the collective is one race of intelligent beings; he has his own peculiar character, achievements, temptations and destiny. Other races exist. Man owes respect to them and a protective reverence to the animals and to the earth which sustains our common life. Human values — courage, love, nobility, compassion — represent a direct participation in the numinous reality which is the basis of our own being. These values are not conventional but Real, and as such they represent a principle of contact with the higher, wiser beings who sometimes appear to guide us. Evil also is real. Human endeavour is meaningful; suffering is not useless, although its purpose may be mysterious. Man can hope to triumph over evil: his striving is efficacious. His life is one perceivable phase of a great, purposeful whole. Though the peril may be extreme, man need not fear annihilation: even in death he is justified in having hope.

Let us now look at the principle charge levelled against the writer of fantasy: the charge that he is “escapist”. I take this to mean that the fantasy-writer comforts his readers with visions of a reality which would be very nice, if it were true. But it is not true: the refreshment fantasy offers is a mirage. It is better to face the harsh truth and make what we can of it, without wasting energy and longing on a hope that has nothing to do with reality.

When you hear fantasy criticized in this way, you will usually hear

the critic proudly claiming for himself the title of "realist".

Let us try to formulate the "realism" of this hypothetical critic. Since he objects so violently to fantasy, we can assume that he disagrees with most of its propositions. In what follows I owe enlightenment, as well as enjoyment, to Richard Purtill's recent excellent publication, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils* (Zondervan, 1974).

The "realist" by implication believes the following—although, unlike the fantasist, he is not in the habit of making his beliefs explicit, and may be shocked when he sees the list. Man is an accident of matter; his intelligence is a product of matter and depends on the brain for its existence. Man is probably an isolated accident: there is no reason to believe that other intelligent species exist. Moral values are a sophisticated rationalisation of elemental drives like hunger, sex, and the herd-instinct; these values are essentially expedient in nature. Evil is subjective—that is, evil is whatever conflicts with expediency. Human suffering is meaningless. Physical reality is all that exists; when the body dies, the person is annihilated. Any belief in a non-physical, immortal component to the human entity is naive wish-fulfilment.

We have all heard these propositions expressed *separately* from time to time. I have never myself met a materialist so courageous he could put this heartbreaking list together and boldly assert, "That is what I believe. That is the truth: deny it if you dare." If I met such a person I should admire his courage and pity his despair, but I would not accept his claim to be a "realist".

This is why the question of fantasy arouses such passions of affirmation or disgust. Fantasy ultimately demands a decision from us: it demands that we decide what we believe to be true. I cannot make that decision for any of you, nor do I wish to spend what time we have left in attempting a full argument for the Romantic world-view—which is, in this case, very close to the religious world-view. My own belief is that the materialist not only impoverishes life but, in his narrow selectivity, ignores a great deal of evidence. The most science can tell us is that under certain conditions—which can be reproduced in a laboratory—life *enters into* matter. It is not self-evident nor has it been proven that matter *creates* life; and it is most unlikely to be proven, because it is not true. The very existence of hate and love ought, if the "realist" were truly realistic, to shake his faith that we participate in no reality beyond the reach of the five senses. Our hypothetical materialist, enamoured though he is of the herd-instinct and other basic drives, arbitrarily ignores the powerful and immemorial instinct of the human race toward *meaning*, and in doing so ignores what has been called, in a fine old phrase, "the deep consent of all great men". For the materialist is in a minority. If he had the respect he professes for the wisdom of the herd, he ought to consider becoming a religious man.

I don't wish to sound flippant: the materialist's courage is greater than my own, although his philosophy recalls a remark I believe Charles Williams makes somewhere, that the intellectual history of the past hundred years tells of the tyranny of brute Reason over the cowed and

demoralized human spirit. The materialist also suffers from the spiritual starvation his convictions entail, for he deprives himself of much of the comfort men have traditionally found to ease their suffering, and then often attempts to live a life of service.

But need he be so without comfort? Well, if his honesty demands it, yes; and experience may so shake us all that honesty may seem to demand it. *Despair as an emotion* is a natural and understandable response to suffering, and it is a mistake to imagine the Romantic as a creature so smug he cannot feel it. He would be shallow indeed if that were so.

But, emotion aside, I believe that reason tends to support the Romantic assertions. I believe reason and the evidence both indicate that human life *is* meaningful, and that Man and his deepest values are both rooted in a reality which creates matter and is antecedent to matter. It is a recognized phase of the Romantic experience to act in accordance with this belief—i.e. to act out of faith—even as despair overwhelms one in the emotional sense. Emotion is treacherous as a guide to truth. In this case it is the materialist who succumbs to it, and the Romantic—whom his critics customarily represent as frothing at the mouth with all kinds of unbridled passion—who disciplines emotion to the service of reason and of faith. In doing this, the Romantic is the more mature.

Well, suppose we grant the Romantic position: suppose we agree to find the individual valuable and life on earth a part of a greater meaning. Need we waste our time in fantasy? Wouldn't it be better to get on with it here and now? Isn't all this creation of parallel worlds so much bosh—so much temptation to daydreaming and laziness? Isn't fantasy escapism in *this* sense?

It is an axiom of Puritan culture (and that means us: only a Puritan culture could produce *Playboy* magazine) that the devil finds work for idle hands. The fantasist is probably up to no good: after all, he isn't visibly doing anything, and we all know where that leads.

Is fantasy escapism? Any human creation is open to abuse. If fantasy is used *as an escape from one's actual duty*, then yes, it is being abused. But the fault lies not with fantasy, but with the person who seeks to evade responsibility. Both the responsible writer and the responsible reader of fantasy understand this, for fantasy is in its essence realistic.

As for daydreaming, it is the playground of the imagination and so the basis of all creativity; it is one of the healthiest things we can do. In its deeper reaches it is a waking dream. As such it gives access to subconscious contents which are an important part of our identity, but which the conscious mind normally excludes from our attention. Great damage has been done by the idea, promoted by Freud and his followers, that the subconscious is a subterranean hell, a repository of savage emotions and disreputable secrets. This attitude fosters a fatal self-distrust, and, not accidentally, a distrust of fantasy in all its forms. The *fear* of fantasy, far more than the love of it, sabotages one's

relationship to the world; for who can act with full power if he fears, and so refuses to know himself? And self-knowledge is finally the whole point of fantasy.

Writers of this genre very often locate the action in some world other than our own—in Middle Earth or Narnia or the many worlds visited by Captain Kirk and Mr Spock in the name of the Federation. (I mention *Star Trek* here because, although it is not a literary fantasy, it is a genuine one and has had a strong influence on recent writing in this field). However, if the writer of fantasy believes the Romantic world-view to be *true*, then it seems to me more interesting and provocative, as well as involving greater skill, to relate his ideas to the world in which we all must operate. Committed Romantics believe this can be done. But if it cannot be done—if the Romantic position is false—then I agree with the critics that one should not write about a fool's Paradise of parallel worlds in which Romanticism is true. So to write about the everyday world is, for the fantasist, to put his beliefs on the line. To do this requires courage and conviction.

The creation of another world can be as significant as it is beautiful; and precisely because the device can be so effective, I admit to a personal feeling that writers should not toss off parallel systems of reality as if they were throwing confetti. Fantasy *need* not involve other worlds any more than it need always be archaic. If Romanticism is true, then the world we live in is a sufficient wonder in itself. As Aragorn puts it: "The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day." A *casual* creation of fantasy-worlds cheapens this device and obscures its usefulness.

The fantasy-world does, however, satisfy two legitimate needs. It is possible to make a fantasy-world very beautiful. Human beings hunger for beauty. Fantasy both satisfies the imaginative need for it and provokes dissatisfaction with the ugliness of a man-distorted environment. In this it performs a service. Fantasy reminds us that beauty is an important form of nourishment. It cannot force us to act to improve the world we live in, but it can reawaken a need we have allowed to become blunted. In doing so it can admittedly create anguish. But anguish, because of its very unpleasantness, is a fertile source of action.

With the word "anguish" we touch the most sensitive aspect of the problem of fantasy. For there is a suffering that is native to human beings: the conviction that we *belong somewhere else*: homesickness. Western culture has expressed this racial homesickness by the myth of the lost Eden. When Tolkien, in considering fantasy-as-escape, asks us to distinguish between the flight of the deserter and the escape of the prisoner, he is putting in more elaborate form the very simple question that is involved here. *Do we—ultimately—belong somewhere else?* If not, then fantasy is a pernicious temptation. If so, then fantasy, by asking us to participate imaginatively in the life of other worlds and other dimensions, is speaking the simple truth.

I hope I have made clear my belief that we *do* in one way belong in

the world, and have many obligations to it and to our fellow men. The fantasist knows this as well as anyone: he does not resemble Margaret Fuller who rapturously announced to Thomas Carlyle, "I accept the universe!"—to which Carlyle replied, "By God, you'd better!"

I am aware that, by finding it necessary to acknowledge an involvement in the world, I lay myself open to the reply, "By God, you'd better!" But at the same time I must express my conviction that, if the fantasist seeks escape, he does so as a prisoner: he seeks escape not, like the deserter, out of cowardly avoidance, but out of an *accurate understanding* of his predicament as a man. It has been evident to many people through the centuries—and is increasingly clear in our own sad and frightening era—that life in the world can *of itself* offer neither security nor peace of mind. The longing expressed in the ancient song—"Jerusalem, my heavenly home, when shall I rest in thee?"—cannot be satisfied nor the question answered by the materialist's reply, that there is no Jerusalem.

I am talking about a way of being religious; I would call it the Romantic type of religiousness. If you are interested in following it further I recommend to you the brilliant work of the late Charles Williams, in particular his study of Christian Romanticism, *The Figure of Beatrice*. Romantic religion affirms the values I have described above, and it sees a world "alive with numinous values". This does not imply a naive or shamanistic view of reality, although Romanticism is not invulnerable to such corruption. But Romanticism by itself alone is not sufficient: it must be balanced by morality and by the best the intellect can offer. The Romantic lives his faith in these three spheres.

True fantasy is one aspect of Romantic religiousness. It re-affirms, with all the resonant conviction the artist can command, the reality of Jerusalem and the legitimacy of our longing. True Romanticism leads not to amoral egotism or irrationalism—although these are two real and potent dangers of this way of being—but rather it returns the Romantic to the world, having revitalized his ability to act in love and hope.

Am I talking ideals? Of course. If we had reached Jerusalem we should not be here, and I should not now have the pleasure of your company. None of us is as wise, loving, compassionate or hopeful as he would like to be. This journey has landmarks but not, in this world or perhaps beyond it, a final end. It has been said, "Men seek for God and *seeking* find him." This is the Quest, which is basic to fantasy as it is to life.

I am not exalting fantasy at the expense of other art-forms; all are necessary for balance and all have a share in the intuitions I have been trying to express. Nor do I think that everyone should be urged to read fantasy. Read what you enjoy. Fantasy is what *I* enjoy, and what my talent permits me to create; and so I have thought for a long time about why it is, to me, so moving and so important. I hope I've provoked you to think about it too; and with that I'll bring this address to a close. Please accept my best wishes for the success of the conference.