

Donald T. Williams, PhD
 P. O. Box # 800807
 Toccoa Falls, Ga. 30598
 dtw@tfc.edu

**HUMANITY AND FAERIE:
 J. R. R. TOLKIEN AND THE PLACE OF NARRATIVE IN
 CONCEPTUALIZING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

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*"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name."*

-- Theseus

Few matters have a greater influence on how we understand ourselves and deal with life's problems than how we tell our own life story, how we see and interpret our own personal narrative. Therefore one of the most helpful things a biblical counselor can do to understand clients is to hear and understand the way they tell their own stories. And one of the most helpful things he can do to serve them is to help them see their own personal story in the light of, and as part of, the grand Story that Scripture presents as the key to the meaning of human existence. Without this kind of vision, our clients can never develop a truly and deeply biblical self concept. Our very understanding of what human nature is will depend on our ability to see that larger Story as meaningful and as *true*. No one has done more to help us pursue that kind of

understanding than the trio of writers I study in my book *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition*.

These men are especially helpful in that they understood the significance of narrative but did not fall prey to the current tendency to reduce all narratives to equally invalid “metanarratives,” none of which can be granted the “totalizing” status of truth. One might say that they escaped Modernism without falling into the equally problematic errors of Postmodernism. And they blessedly also avoid its jargon. They speak not of *metanarratives* but of *myths*. A myth in this sense is a story that gives significance to the world. Most such stories of course are false; but Christians believe that there is one that is actually true.

This essay will focus on how Tolkien can help us understand the theological significance of narrative in ways that I hope my colleagues in biblical counseling will be able to apply to their own ministries.

In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton had noticed the inability of the modernist narrative of naturalistic Evolution to account for the uniqueness of human nature, especially at the point of its creativity, noting that while a history of cows in twelve volumes would not make very exciting reading, the story of mankind is anything but dull. He concluded that the only way of accounting for this difference was by accepting the biblical account of our creation in the image of the Creator. Any other starting point leads inevitably to one form or another of reductionism. C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* continued this battle against reductionism by explicating the central role in human nature of what he called the *Tao*, our recognition of and participation in a transcendent and universal set of moral values that is inescapably part of the real objective universe, the denial of which makes us less than fully human. Though he develops the connection in other books (cf. the moral argument for theism in *Mere Christianity*), it is plain that for Lewis this feature of human nature is also rooted in the biblical story that begins with our creation in the image of the same reality- and value-generating Word.

Lewis's friend J. R. R. Tolkien fought the abolition of Man not only by writing a very unbovine history of Middle Earth, but also by thinking profoundly about the nature and significance of certain kinds of stories that our strange species has made and keeps coming back to. His essay "On Faerie Stories" is full of insight not only into the stories themselves, but also their human makers and readers. He finds them as creative as Chesterton did, and participating in a very Lewisian *Tao*; for they are compelled to make stories full of magic and marvels, stories

in which Good confronts Evil and in which "keeping promises (even those with intolerable consequences)" forms "one of the notes of the horns of Elfland, and not a dim note" (67). But Tolkien goes on to be more explicit about where these myth-making qualities in our race come from, nailing down features of that story that Chesterton and Lewis (in the books we have mentioned so far) only hinted at.

CREATION AND SUB-CREATION

He does this by answering a friend who had questioned the value of myth for "enlightened" moderns.

*"Dear Sir," I said—"Although now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made"* (54).

"We make still by the law in which we're made." I can still remember the excitement with which I first read those words as a young high-school student wrestling with whether I could still believe the Christian faith in which I had been reared, given the failure (actually, to be more honest, refusal) of the Christians I knew to interact intelligently and responsibly with the problems of modern thought (Williams, *Inklings* chp. 1). For Tolkien had just roped all the

problems and their answers together in a single sentence. Man, in other words, is inexplicable by materialist reductionism because of the *Imago Dei*; we love to tell and hear stories, because we are made in the image of the Creator whose creation is in fact the Story we call History and Redemption. Or, in terms more in keeping with Tolkien's defense of Faerie, the human race is incapable of being fully explained or portrayed by either philosophical or literary naturalism. We are such irrepressible inventors and expressers of ourselves because we are made in the image of the Creator (cf. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* 34f). This Creator not only called the world into existence but also gave it value ("And God saw that the light was good"). Thus those values, rooted in his own nature, have the same objective reality as the physical things he made (Williams, "Objectivity of Value"). Hence our addiction to ideals like Rights, Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, which refuse to be treated as mere subjective constructs no matter how hard our secular philosophies push us to do so.

But out of all these creative and *Tao*-inspired possibilities, Tolkien focuses on stories. He builds on the theology of literature found in Sidney's "Defense of Poesy," expanding it to meet modern questions and providing it with a critical vocabulary (Williams, *Inklings* chp. 2). Every writer, like God, creates a world, determines the laws of its nature, and peoples it with characters whose significant actions give that world its meaning. God's "primary world" is reflected in our "secondary worlds," which, far from being mere escape or wish fulfillment, reflect back into the primary world the marvelous quality--the "enchantment"--that is really there by virtue of its created, its non-reductionist character, but which familiarity and secularist philosophy work to obscure.

CREATION AND IRREDUCIBILITY

The idea of the world's (and man's) *createdness* as the explanation of their stubborn resistance to reductionism is an implication of Tolkien's analysis that is worth pondering. Its corollary is that the denial of the doctrine of Creation is the explanation of our inability to resist the various futile flirtations with reductionism that the modern world tempts us to.

One could say of a story or a chapter that it is just marks on paper. One could support this conclusion by minute study of the chemical and spectrographic properties of the object in question, buttressed by so many footnotes that it began to look like a proof. But no matter how

impressive, this analysis will never be accepted as complete by anyone who has read the words and found inspiration or a message worth receiving there. Now contrast the story with a piece of paper on which ink has been spilled. That object *is* reducible to marks on paper. The difference between the two is precisely the action of a creator. As a result of the absence or presence of such action, one object is an accident, the other an artifact. If we insist on treating the artifact as an accident, if we refuse to recognize any distinction between accidents and artifacts as even potentially valid because we have denied the very possibility of a creator, we will never be able to understand the story. So we see that one who does not believe in creators (and hence in artifacts) is forced to be a reductionist, to treat and understand the story as if it were only an accidental and hence arbitrary inkblot. (Ironically, even our efforts to interpret that inkblot anyway as a kind of Rorschach test depend on the very creativity that is shown by the storyteller, used in this case by the interpreter.) If our world view precludes the possibility of a Creator, it must therefore preclude creators as well. And this is exactly the approach that secular thought is perforce committed to by its very nature.

The story has a real, non-arbitrary meaning that goes beyond its physical properties because the act of creation ties it to something bigger than it is--the author, who has poured something, but not all, of his own plenitude of being into it. As Milton put it in "Areopagetica," "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do contain, as in a vial, the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them" (720). Because he is created in the image of the infinite and eternal and therefore irreducible Creator, Man is himself irreducible and gives some of this quality to his work. The paper with the ink spilled on it, on the other hand is not related to anything other than a series of physical events. If we find a meaning in its ink, like the Peanuts characters seeing pictures in the clouds ("I see Beethoven composing the Fifth Symphony." "I see Napoleon fighting the Battle of Waterloo." "What do you see, Charlie Brown?" "I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsy, but I changed my mind."), that meaning is necessarily arbitrary. But the meaning of the story is not arbitrary because there is something larger--the personality of the creator--behind it.

So Tolkien is saying that human beings themselves are like the story, not the inkblot. Human beings are creatures who can write irreducible stories (either on paper or in the medium

of their lives) because they derive their own irreducibility from the Creator. In Tolkien's language, they make because they are made.

The reductionism which is entailed in the very nature of secular thought manifests itself in many ways in literary scholarship. Gaius and Titius in Lewis's "Green Book" from *Abolition of Man* reduced statements of value to statements of subjective emotion, thus reducing literature to the expression of subjective feelings. Post-Modern Deconstructionists reduce stories to arbitrary linguistic signs on paper in a way uncannily reminiscent of our story-versus-inkblot analogy, thus reducing literature to a branch of philosophy--skeptical epistemology--or to a branch of politics--leftist ideology. In a prophetic passage, Richard Weaver said that "Certainly one of the most important revelations about a period comes in its theory of language, for that informs us whether language is viewed as a bridge to the noumenal or as a body of fictions convenient for grappling with transitory phenomena" (150, cf. 158)--an uncanny description of Deconstruction four decades before its arrival. Other Post-Modern scholars reduce truth to power and everything in history to race, class, and gender, thus reducing literature to a form of class warfare with white males as the enemy. Packer therefore remarks with real perspicacity,

That the shadows of French existentialism, Marxist atheism, and American hippiedom hang heavy over postmodernism, that reductionism rules its head while cynicism eats at its heart, and that its idea of political correctness makes it tyrannical towards dissentients much sooner than was ever the case with modernism itself are surely evident facts, and very disturbing facts too. Claiming to be a bracing disinfectant for the modern mind, postmodernism appears as a mode of intellectual anarchy, and in cultural terms as very much a dead-end street. ("On from Orr" 251).

(For an excellent discussion of the nature of several of these reductionisms, see Bauman, *Pilgrim Theology* chps. 8-12. On behaviorism see Schaeffer, *Back to Freedom and Dignity*. On the Post-Modern forms, especially as related to literature, good studies include Dockery, Ellis, Graff, Groothuis, Jeffrey, Kimball, Rapp, Ritchie, Vanhoozer, and Veith,; see also Williams, *Inklings*, intro., "Apologetic Responses," and Appendix B of *Mere Humanity*.) In Tolkien's day,

stories were reduced to archaeology, compilations of sources, folklore, or mines of information for historical linguistics.

Now, all these approaches are not without a certain kind of limited validity, for the story is also ink marks on paper; it is more, not less. But in so far as the secular cast of the modern mind is forced to absolutize such approaches and push them toward reductionism, they are dehumanizing and hence inhumane, leaving much that is significant out of consideration. They have "just the quality of the madman's argument: we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out of the picture" (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 23). That is why John Gardner was simply right when he said, "Every chance composition backs a lie. . . . Every nonsense artist, deconstructionist . . . is a plague carrier, a usurper of space that belongs to the sons of God" (*On Moral Fiction* 174).

In his famous and seminal essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien gave us an allegory that is just as applicable to the modern forms of literary reductionism as it was to the ones he was trying to shake off in the 30's. It deserves to be quoted in full:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspected a deposit of coal under the soil and began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion." But from the top of that tower, the man had been able to look out upon the sea. (54-55)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF STORIES

Man then is that creature who can (even must) write stories; stories are artifacts irreducible to accidents; and they get that irreducibility from their creators, who got it from the Creator. Those stories tell us an awful lot about their creators, and their irreducibility to inkblots or atoms in motion is just the first of many things they show us. What Tolkien says is applicable to all stories, but is most clearly evident in the kind he is actually writing about: Faerie Stories. He chose the Faerie Story because, like his own fiction, it

Exists on the edges of the literary canon; it ignores or denies value to the empirical precepts of our culture; it defies the pragmatic morality and philosophy on which our culture rests; it is turned to, though often sheepishly or covertly, by a huge readership--hungry for something, not knowing what they seek. (Greene 45)

Tolkien would go far toward explaining just what it is that we seek.

One feature of the Faerie Story which is central to Tolkien's literary apologetic is the Happy Ending. It is, he concludes, essential to the form, which begins "Once upon a time" and ends "happily ever after." But it is not just the fact that things turn out well: "It is a sudden and miraculous grace . . . It does not deny the existence of . . . sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" ("Essay" 68). That is why, when the "turn" comes, there is "a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart . . . as keen as that given by any form of literary art" (69). To this moment he gives the technical name *eucatastrophe*.

Tolkien suggests that this moment of *eucatastrophe* in a well-constructed fairy story moves us so because it carries a glimpse of deeper realities about who we are--about our own story, as it were. As he explained to his son Christopher, "it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth; your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back" (*Letters* 100). (If there is a Creator, His Story is the Father of all stories--which is to say that there *is* one valid Metanarrative, and Post-Modernists would not even have the ability to deny it

if it did not exist.) And just as he made explicit what Chesterton had been hinting at when he appealed to the role of the *imago Dei* in our making or beginning, so here he is not reticent about spelling out the theological meaning of the climax of our larger story either:

God redeemed the corrupt making creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces the essence of fairy-stories. . . . Among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable *eucaastrophe*. But this story has entered History and the primary world. ("Essay" 71)

Or, in other words, "Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story" which was also history and reality (*Letters* 101). The incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ not only complete and fulfill Old-Testament prophecy, they complete and fulfill the plots of all the great myths and fairy stories of the human race.

Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis would develop this idea in *Miracles*. When Jesus turned the water into wine, he fulfilled the hints from nature that pagans had reified into Bacchus. When he multiplied the loaves he fulfilled the hints that had led them to worship Ceres.

He is like the corn-king because the corn-king is a portrait of Him. The similarity is not in the least unreal or accidental. For the corn-king is derived (through human imagination) from the facts of Nature, and the facts of Nature from her Creator; the Death and Re-birth pattern is in her because it was first in Him. (120)

So the Death and Resurrection of Christ is the fulfillment of much more than just Old-Testament prophecy. All the hints in our literature that we are more than mere collocations of atoms coalesce into a coherent explanation of who and what we are when we see that this *eucaastrophe* is indeed the Happy Ending we were made for: fairy stories do capture something essential to a full view of Reality. As Chesterton put it, "Fairyland is nothing but the sunny

country of common sense" (*Orthodoxy* 49). Because of our creation in the image of God, we transcend the merely natural and cannot be reduced to atoms in motion.

Supernatural is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter. But to fairies it can hardly be applied, unless *super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix. For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom. (Tolkien, "Essay" 4-5)

CONCLUSION

We were made for a higher bliss, and we show it by our own making. We make because we were made in the image of the Maker. What we make is sometimes corrupted because we fell from His grace. Chesterton had put it this way: "God had written, not so much a poem, but rather a play; a play he had planned as perfect, but which has necessarily been left to human actors and stage managers who have since made rather a mess of it" (*Orthodoxy* 78). But the stories we make as we strut and fret our hour upon that stage still speak of our longing for restoration, because we were made in the image of the Maker who is Savior and Redeemer as well. The Christian story, in other words, has the only explanation for why human beings tell stories, and live by the stories that they tell themselves, that avoids some form of reductionism. It therefore offers counselors resources that cannot be found in the various reductionist psychologies that have dominated the field of counseling.

In seeking that restoration, that *eucatastrophe*, Christ is what we have always been looking for without knowing it. He is the ultimate definition of true humanity, both the template for personal integration and the only path that can take us there. So the one vantage point from which our whole strange and unbovine history makes sense is also the one place where Myth and History are one: the spot where, in the light of the rising sun, the shadow of a Cross points to the open door of an Empty Tomb.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Donald T. Williams holds a BA in English from Taylor University, an M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a PhD in Medieval and Renaissance Literature from the University of Georgia. He is the author of six books: *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Broadman, 1994), *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), *The Disciple's Prayer* (Christian Publications, 1999), *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Broadman, 2006), *Credo: An Exposition of the Nicene Creed* (Chalice Press, 2007), and *The Devil's Dictionary of the Christian Faith* (Chalice, 2008). He has also contributed essays, poems, and reviews to such journals as *Christianity Today*, *Touchstone*, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *Philosophia Christi*, *Theology Today*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Mythlore*, *SEVEN*, *Christian Educator's Journal*, *Preaching*, and *Christian Research Journal*. An ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America with many years of pastoral experience, he has spent several summers in Africa training local pastors for Church Planting International, and currently serves as Professor of English and Director of the School of Arts and Sciences at Toccoa Falls College in the hills of NE Georgia. His website is www.doulomen.tripod.com.