

Catastrophe and Eucatastrophe: Russell and Tolkien on the True Form of Fiction

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By “the true form of fiction” I will mean the form of story-telling that most accurately portrays the human condition. By calling one form true, I do not mean to imply that all others are “false;” just that, in the last analysis, they ignore or distort key aspects of the human condition. In this essay I will compare the fictional forms representative of what I take to be the two broad worldviews on offer as live options in much of the West today, and which I will loosely call naturalism and theism (I will focus on Christian theism, but I hope much of what I say will apply more broadly). These forms are often assumed to be, respectively, tragedy and comedy – both forms with much to be said for them, to be sure, but it may seem that naturalism will come out ahead on a dramatic scale. At any rate Bertrand Russell, whom I will take as a representative of the naturalist tradition, holds that tragedy is “the proudest, the most triumphant”¹ of all the arts. Perhaps, but I want to explore, and try to make plausible, the idea that the common assumption about these forms of fiction is mistaken. It may be that naturalism merely appears to support the artist’s instinct for tragedy, but that its true fictional form is the existentialist novel. Theism, on the other hand, or theism that takes seriously the notion of the Fall, is not best represented by comedy, or at least not comedy in any simple form unmixed with tragic elements. Theism can see history, in consequence of the Fall and despite people’s best efforts, as a “long defeat,”² and this allows it to underwrite tragedy. And yet theism’s belief in a guiding Providence within history, and a saving grace above it, indicates a special form of tragedy – what I will call tragedy baptized.

Both naturalism and theism can recognize the ultimately catastrophic condition of human history – of each person and of

¹ Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship” in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, Paul Edwards (ed.) (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 112.

² Tolkien describes history as a “long defeat” in letter dated December 15th, 1956 (see *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 255). Joseph Pearce cites this letter in his *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), p. 148, and my use of the phrase is influenced by his.

humankind as a whole. As Russell puts it, “the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins” (Russell, 107). J.R.R. Tolkien, whom I will take as a representative of the theistic literary tradition, writes approvingly of the old Norse conviction that “man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme,” he hastens to add, “no Christian need despise.”³ Both traditions rightly see us as facing inevitable catastrophic defeat in time. But for the naturalist, I will suggest, catastrophe must collapse into the absurd. The theist, on the other hand, can believe with Tolkien that this defeat is itself encompassed by victory, which from time to time, with “a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart,”⁴ enters into history, transfixes it,⁵ and perhaps for a time reverses its downward march. Tolkien refers to such moments, and the stories that house them, as “eucatastrophic.” What I want to suggest here is that to the extent we prefer such stories to those consistent with naturalism – and prefer them not just in the sense of liking them better, but also in the sense of thinking them more truthful representations of the human condition – to that extent we have a reason to prefer theism to naturalism – to believe and to hope that theism is true.

While Tolkien introduces the term “eucatastrophe” in the context of his study of the nature of fairy stories, he holds that the eucatastrophic story is the echo of the Gospel, God’s word on the human condition. But if this is so, then eucatastrophe ought also to be the form of Christian fiction more broadly: we should find that not just fairy stories but also Christian poetry and novels, e.g., tend toward this form; we’d better find also that this form can inspire good literature that in no way sugarcoats our tragic condition. Before turning to this, I will look at Russell as one of the last defenders of tragedy, taken as straightforwardly catastrophic, as the true form of fiction. After pointing to some problems for this position, I will look at Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and his lesser known *Leaf by Niggle* to illustrate the character of the eucatastrophic story, and to make good my claim that it might be seen as tragedy baptized. I close by pointing to some partial confirmation of the thesis that eucatastrophe is the true form of Christian fiction by a brief look at works such as Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*” in *Beowulf: a Verse Translation*, translated by Seamus Heaney, edited by Daniel Donoghue, (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 119.

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *The Tolkien Reader*, Introduced by Peter Beagle (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 86.

⁵ Roland Hein speaks the experience of *kairos* time, the transcendent time in which God dwells and in which successive, chronological time seems to stand still for a heartbeat or two; see his *Christian Mythmakers* (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1998), p. 4.

I. The Human Condition according to Naturalism: Tragic or Absurd?

Let me begin by placing Russell in a context that will help explain why I accord him the role I do (as one of the “last defenders of tragedy” as the true form of fiction). Russell’s thesis about the human condition is one form of what Charles Taylor calls the “austere ethic of self-responsible freedom” and disengaged reason,⁶ by which he means, roughly, the stance toward the universe emerging from the scientific revolution, whose early spokesmen were Descartes and Locke, and according to which rational insight into cosmic order is insight “into something which entails the emptiness of all ancient [teleological, purposive] conceptions of such order: the utter separation of mind from a mechanistic universe of matter which is most emphatically not a medium of thought or meaning, which is expressively dead” (Taylor, 148). We remain somehow free in this mechanistic universe by “disengaging” from it, and “objectifying” it, depriving it of having any normative force for us (Taylor, 160), emancipating ourselves from physical conditions, history, and traditions, mastering nature and remaking ourselves as we see fit (cf. Taylor, 175).

The remnant of religious conviction in this view is progressively shed as we move from Descartes, to Locke, to the Deists, and finally to the atheists of the Victorian period. Pessimism has set in, and the ideal of mastery gives way to some degree to the ideal of defiance. Taylor cites Samuel Putnam, “a former minister, [who] was ready to look at ‘the infinite abyss’ in which humanity will vanish without a single ‘gleam of hope’: ‘The very moment man recognizes the evil of his lot, that very moment the grandeur of his being arises. For he can love; he can endure; he can perish without terror’” (Taylor, 404). He goes on to mention Bertrand Russell as a later continuator of this tradition, and indeed Russell’s “A Free Man’s Worship” might serve as a manifesto for it. Russell writes that “we see, surrounding the narrow raft illuminated by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour” (Russell, 113). He sees it as man’s task to live “proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power” (Russell, 116). William Ernest Henley’s poem *Invictus* is an excellent literary expression of this defiant attitude.

Now Russell shows integrity and apparent consistency in naming tragedy “the proudest, the most triumphant” of all the arts; he also shows, inadvertently, what is wrong with his view. Tragedy is

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 496.

triumphant, proud, and the many other noble things that it can be, only for the audience. The experience of reading or seeing a tragic play and the struggles of the protagonists against Russell's "irresistible forces" can doubtless be meaningful (cathartic, as Aristotle said); one living through a real tragedy is merely smashed by those forces, and is much more likely to experience life as simply absurd. And on Russell's view we are all protagonists of a tragedy. Perhaps a few noble souls can appreciate the tragedy even as they live it (that is part of what Russell is advising us to do), and so be also "in the audience." Also, we can perhaps obtain some solace from the notion that if we live truly or authentically, we shall not have lived in vain, as an audience will survive us and perhaps appreciate our part in the play (as individuals or at least as part of a group). Perhaps, but we should not lose sight of the fact that not only the protagonist of the tragedy, but also the audience, all of it, irretrievably, and "all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system" (Russell, 107). And without protagonists and audience, there cannot be any tragedy. All of us will have lived in vain.

Russell and his precursors were sustained in their defiant attitude in part by a lingering belief in a transcendent realm against which the life of human beings could be measured: as I have pointed out, the substance of this realm was progressively attenuated over time, but even Russell, at the time he wrote "A Free Man's Worship," clung to a last vestige of it – he was still something of a Moorean about moral value. Not much later this belief in the transcendent disappears altogether in most philosophical circles, and with it, it seems to me, the conviction that tragedy is the form of fiction true to the human condition. With the last vestige of the divine, in the eyes of many, wrung out of the universe, the human condition no longer rises to the level of tragedy. In most analytic philosophy such questions dealing with "the meaning of life" have been ignored;⁷ elsewhere tragedy is replaced by the existentialist novel, in which, although the defiance sometimes remains, life is admitted to be absurd, as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, or "The Wall." Of those who take up the question of the meaning of life at all, few say that it has one.⁸

⁷ There are exceptions: Martha Nussbaum draws on the novels of Henry James and others in exploring possibilities for a meaningful moral life (see her *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)), while Daniel Dennett blends the existentialist and analytic projects, explicitly endorsing Nietzsche's call to affirm the purposeless universe, but is also concerned to argue that modern notions of morality and meaning can be preserved in it (See his *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), especially the closing few chapters).

⁸ Let me just note that, in the foregoing, I do not take myself to have provided anything like an airtight argument that metaphysical naturalism cannot provide a satisfactory account of the meaning of life. Rather, I have just tried to argue that such a project would be at

II. The Human Condition according to Theism: Tolkien and the Baptism of Tragedy

On this question of whether life has a meaning, Tolkien is predictably unfashionable. He is not completely out of sympathy with Russell's view: as we saw, he is sympathetic to the Norse view that "man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die." But as a Christian he has reason to believe that, while this is the human condition in time, there is more to life than defiant death.⁹ This leads him to develop, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," his theory of *eucatastrophe*, the sudden turn in the story that, perhaps just for a moment, lets a gleam of final victory shine on a history of long defeat. Tolkien believes that the eucatastrophic story is, in my terms, the true form of fiction. One question we will need to put to him is, can this form adequately represent the tragic elements of the human condition? Another, can it produce good literature – in particular, can it represent the intrusion of grace into history without employing *deus ex machina* devices?

Tolkien's short story *Leaf by Niggle* affords a short and rewarding way both to illustrate my critique of Russell's view and to understand the character of the eucatastrophic story. Niggle is a painter whose life work is a vast painting of a landscape centered upon a magnificent tree. Although kind-hearted, he becomes too wrapped up in his own work, and becomes to some degree morally deficient, as shown in his somewhat un-neighborly relations with his neighbor, Mr. Parish. And after devoting much of his life to this painting, he dies quite suddenly with the work undone, his last moments in life spent regretting this – his life seems perhaps to be a tragedy, if a small one.

What happens to the painting is quite interesting. Most of the very large canvas it covered was used to patch Mr. Parish's leaky roof, but a corner of the canvas bearing a mountain peak and spray of leaves is recovered by another man, who is captivated by it. Over time, it all crumbles except one perfect leaf. The man frames this, however, and bequeaths it to the Town Museum, "and for a long while 'Leaf: by Niggle' hung there in a recess, and was noticed by a few eyes."¹⁰ And here it seems, perhaps, that Niggle's life was not wholly robbed of meaning by his sudden death which left his work incomplete: he did create or capture something, and did succeed in communicating

least very difficult (and maybe futile), and to suggest that what appears to be the general movement of secular academic thought away from such a project seems to indicate a widespread recognition of this (perhaps without as widespread recognition of what I think are its unhappy implications).

⁹ Characters in Tolkien's stories facing immanent death often express a hope to go out in a manner worthy of a song of remembrance – they hope also that those songs will be sung. And in Tolkien's world, unlike Russell's, they will be.

¹⁰ *Leaf by Niggle* in *The Tolkien Reader*, pp. 119-120.

it at least to some. He seems a minor tragic hero. Yes, except that “eventually the Museum was burnt down, and the leaf, and Niggle, were entirely forgotten in his old country” (ibid., 120). Dark waters close over his head, and it is as if the little painter had never been – and so the tragedy seems to degenerate into the absurd: a futile little man’s life efforts finally and totally come to nothing . . . as happens, according to Russell, with all men.

Except that here Tolkien is able to deploy resources not available to secular philosophers: The second part of *Leaf by Niggle* concerns Niggle’s adventures after life in his old country. To put it in the barest possible terms, Tolkien has spoken of death in terms of a long journey, and since Niggle is not wholly prepared for it he goes initially only so far as what stands in for Purgatory in order to be made ready for the rest of the journey. After some time in a sort of “Workhouse,” an advocate arranges for some “gentle treatment,” and he is sent off to the countryside. In the course of a bicycle ride, the landscape begins to become familiar to him, and then a “great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up, and fell off his bicycle. Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished” (ibid., 113). Indeed, his scene has become a forest, still unfinished in places, with the Mountains glimmering in the far background.

Niggle happily sets to work on the unfinished portions. Before he has been at it too long, he is joined by his old neighbor Parish. Delighted to see each other in this new place, they work together to complete it, building a cottage, planting gardens, and so forth. Eventually they sense that their work is done and move on to the Mountains. But the worth of Niggle’s (and Parish’s) life-work is not yet played out. So beautiful has it become that the authorities take to sending inmates of the Workhouse there for a holiday, or even as the final stop before the Mountains. One warden ventures to say that the region must, having become so valuable, be given a name. The second informs him that it has already acquired one: “‘Niggle’s Parish. I sent a message to both of them to tell them.’ ‘What did they say?’ ‘They both laughed. Laughed – the Mountains rang with it’” (ibid., 120). This to me is the eucatastrophic moment of the story: we see these small, peevish men so far redeemed that their joy at the assistance provided to others, and their ability to laugh at themselves, can shake the mountains. And so far from being rendered absurd by the “trampling march of unconscious power,” Niggle’s life and work, though blotted out from under the sun, turn out to be of boundless worth and meaning.

Now, the eucatastrophic story-teller faces unique literary challenges, chief among them the risk of invoking a *deus ex machina* in order to bring about the happy ending, and the danger that the happy ending will devolve into the saccharine sort of “and they lived happily ever after” that characterizes bad fairy tales. But when done

well the eucatastrophic story avoids either fate. *Leaf by Niggle* is a fine short story, but I don't want to claim the status of great literature for it. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, however, can justly lay claim to this status.¹¹ I want now to show how it embodies the eucatastrophic, successfully avoiding both the cheaply miraculous and the cheaply optimistic.

Although God may in some way come onto the stage in the eucatastrophic story, He need not enter from the machinery backstage: although the sudden upturn of events is often miraculous, in retrospect it completes rather than compromises the integrity of the story (God and His grace are, as Bradley Birzer puts it, "contained within the very fiber of the story"¹²). This is best seen by looking at the part of *The Lord of the Rings* that seems most contrived, most *ad hoc* (at least it seemed that way to me for many years): Gollum's fall: Frodo having failed in his resolve, Gollum conveniently bites the Ring from Frodo's finger and, dancing in ecstasy, falls with it into the fire. Some commentators have argued that Tolkien is here invoking the principle that evil turns against itself. Perhaps it does, and perhaps he is, but it is still rather convenient that evil should turn against itself in that way and at that moment rather than another. Again, it has been pointed out this is Providence at work. But, true as this is, if the explanation stops there, that is a pure case of *deus ex machina* (are we to suppose that God pushed him over the edge?). Tolkien's God is the supreme artist, the Creator who is the paradigm for sub-creating artists, and He is a better novelist than that.¹³ And so is Tolkien. Gollum's fall was augured 300 pages earlier by his oath to Frodo taken by the Ring. Frodo says to Gollum,

You swore a promise by what you call the Precious. Remember that! It will hold you to it; but it will seek a way to twist it to your own undoing. . . . In the last need, Sméagol, I should put on the Precious; and the Precious mastered you long ago. If I, wearing it, were to command

¹¹ This seems to be the emerging consensus of careful critical attention. In addition to secondary sources already cited, see for example *Understanding the Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*, edited by Neil Isaacs and Rose Zimbaro (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Ralph Woods, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); and Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

¹² Bradley Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), p. 58.

¹³ I largely agree with Thomas Hibbs's reading of Tolkien on Divine Providence in his "Providence and the Dramatic Unity of *The Lord of the Rings*" in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), although he does not call attention to Frodo's (self-fulfilling?) prediction (in fact, to my knowledge, this point has not been made by any commentator).

you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire. And such would be my command.¹⁴

The miraculous event did not come from nowhere, but is seen, in retrospect, to be an integral development of previous historical events.

More importantly, the eucatastrophic turn and resolution of the story that seemed headed for tragedy or absurdity is not at a banal sort of “and they lived happily ever after” ending. Elements of tragedy are retained – so we can still see the story as our story, as true to the human condition – because the long defeat picks up again after the brief victory. When Sam, rescued by eagles from the aftermath of the Ring’s destruction, wakes up, he is stunned to find Gandalf alive:

But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is every sad thing going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?” (Bk. VI, c. IV, p. 930).

“A great Shadow has departed,” Gandalf replies; and yet, not all darkness has gone with it, and not *every* sad thing does come untrue. At the end, Frodo reflects that the Shire, and indeed Middle-Earth, have been saved, “but,” he concludes, “not for me;” (Bk. VI, c. IX, p. 1006). He was too broken by the quest to remain. The Three Rings are still undone, and the Elves still go into the West, leaving behind a greyer world of men. And in the story’s final words Sam tells his wife, “Well, I’m back” (p. 1008) – not, “I’m home.” History remains a long defeat, and as with tragedy, no amount of heroism can secure final victory within it:

It [the eucatastrophic story] does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe . . . it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.¹⁵

It is, in a sense, tragedy baptized, and its denial of the final absurdity of life ultimately saves tragedy from collapsing into dramatic existentialism.

It is, moreover, “the far off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world” (On Fairy-Stories, p. 88): for the Incarnation, Tolkien says, is the eucatastrophe of history, and the Resurrection the eucatastrophe of the Gospel. The Gospel story indeed follows – or rather establishes – the pattern of the eucatastrophic story: Christ is raised, yet ascends and leaves us, and history, stopped and transfixed for a moment,

¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), Book IV, c. III, p. 626. All references are to this edition, which has the pages numbered continuously throughout the trilogy.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *The Tolkien Reader*, p. 86.

resumes its downward path. The lion does not lie down with the lamb in history (in fact, almost the first thing he does is to begin eating Christians). The “happily ever after” is kept in the hereafter: but we’ve been shown the empty tomb and just a glimpse of the life beyond it – the Joy beyond the walls of the world. We will still die – but maybe not in vain.

III. Eucatastrophe in Christian Fiction

If I am right that the eucatastrophic story is the form of fiction indirectly enjoined upon Christian authors by the Gospel, then we should find that not just fairy-stories but also the best and most truly Christian literature in other genres also tends toward this form. Now, the claim is not that a Christian cannot write a novel about war or a love sonnet or a lament of a lost child; nor even that such works would be by a Christian but could not themselves be specifically Christian. The claim is rather that Christian works that are “fundamental” in the sense that they are about the human condition in the Fallen world will tend to take this form.¹⁶ I believe that my thesis finds partial confirmation in, e.g., T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* Trilogy, Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Revelation,” Chesterton’s *The Deluge* (which has always struck me as a Christian response to Henley’s *Invictus*), Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and C.S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*. Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock* could have been another example if he could have made up his mind whether he was writing a Catholic novel or a psychological horror story.¹⁷

¹⁶ The qualifier “in the Fallen world” is important, because it ensures that Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which is about human life *beyond* the Fallen world, is not the massive counterexample it might otherwise be. I say might, for perhaps it does take this form. Or perhaps it would be wiser to say that Dante is right (of course!) that his work is a comedy, and also grant that the human condition taken absolutely is best represented by comedy, but hold that that small but vital part of the human condition embracing our journey through the Fallen world is best represented by the eucatastrophic story, now seen as a sub-genre of comedy – tragedy baptized is also comedy-in-hope.

¹⁷ This list, obviously enough, includes only 20th Century English-language works. I believe the list could be expanded in both dimensions in ways that would support my thesis (here I have in mind, e.g., Jane Austen’s novels and Georges Bernanos’s *The Diary of a Country Priest*), but a more thorough historical investigation of my claim is not undertaken here. Let me note, however, that the eucatastrophic is not limited to fiction: Consider for example the narrative history of Christopher Dawson, for instance in his second set of Gifford Lectures (*Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*): there he concludes with the decline of the medieval civilization, yet noting that it has wrought a permanent, and positive, change in the soul of man. Or again, Alasdair MacIntyre’s characterization in *After Virtue* of the moral life as a quest susceptible to tragedy – a characterization later amended so as to portray the moral life as a pilgrimage: “The moral progress of the plain person is always the beginnings of a pilgrim’s progress.” (see his “Plain Persons and Moral

But Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is one of the most powerful recent examples: Against a background of a culture and way of life declining as World War II and "the Age of Hooper" approach, a traditional Catholic family is progressively torn to shreds by alcohol, adultery, divorce, apostasy, and death. Yet with "a twitch upon the thread" (here Waugh intentionally uses Chesterton's phrase), all are brought from their various states of fallenness back into the fold. By any secular standards, the family is still ruined, but we see that only this ruin could have saved it, bringing it back into the Church, carrying the "poor agnostic" family friend Charles Ryder in its wake. Unique to Waugh is his treatment of the eucatastrophic turn in the story: his native cynicism prevents the least trace of sentimentalism from creeping in. Although the reader experiences the "catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears" that Tolkien describes, the characters experience only grief mixed with religious awe: Ryder describes the experience in terms of being buried in an avalanche. Or to vary the metaphor and slightly adapt Dana Gioia's waterfall image, their souls are "the mist / steaming from the gorge, this pure paradox, / the shattered river rising as it falls."¹⁸

What all these works share with Tolkien's, and with the Gospel, is: First, a certain agreement with Russell about the inexorable "trampling march of unconscious power," the certainty that, in Tolkien's words, "man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die." Second, again in agreement with Russell, a faith in the worth and meaning of the human struggle. Third, the artful deployment of resources unavailable to Russell rendering coherent the first two commitments (resources related, however implicitly, to Providence and to grace). The effect of the eucatastrophic story, when done well, is very powerful: It at once renders the struggle more meaningful, the death and defeat that will come at the end of the struggle non-final,¹⁹ and the world that is the stage of the struggle less real: greyer, a bit hollow, and, as Tolkien clearly sees, short of elves (the one race immune to decline). Yet the world is not left meaningless, nor wholly disenchanting, for it is connected still to another world: "I'm back," Sam said, not "home" – he has the sense of what Chesterton calls homesickness at home. In one word the effect of the eucatastrophic story is Joy, in C.S. Lewis's sense of a desire, itself the most desirable thing encountered in this world, for something one knows not quite

Philosophy" in *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 152

¹⁸ Dana Gioia, "The Litany" in *Interrogations at Noon* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001), p. 11.

¹⁹ Or at least potentially non-final: Theism leaves open, in the form of Hell, the possibility of final tragic defeat and Augustine's second death: to adapt Léon Bloy's words, "The only tragedy in life is not to be a saint."

what; or in Tolkien's phrase, "Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." It is the hope of Heaven.

If I could hazard one tentative practical suggestion in closing: The eucatastrophe should be a central standard of Christian (and perhaps more broadly, religious) literary criticism (whether in reflecting upon one's own or another's work). Again, it is not that every story should take this form – but perhaps every story should be able to fit into the framework provided by this form, such that it could be part of a larger eucatastrophic story. For the Christian, fiction is "true" to the extent that it tells or is at least compatible with this sort of story, for the human condition in history is to be a protagonist of a eucatastrophic story – thus do such stories echo the Gospel. At least to the extent that such stories "ring true," to the extent that tragedy baptized strikes us as a more accurate representation of the human condition than does the absurd, such stories give the lie to naturalism. To that extent, then, their authors, perhaps sometimes unintentionally, can serve as apostles to the modern agnostic. Instead of deconstructionists we need "reconstructionists," showing how great literature derives power from its, perhaps unconscious, link to the Gospel.²⁰

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²⁰ C.S. Lewis makes a similar point in an interview, reprinted in *God in the Dock*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); cf. p. 264.