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Theology Beyond Reason: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Fantastic in  
British Literature

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*Abstract*

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary investigation of a hermeneutical possibility for engaging in theological discourse after the Cartesian epistemological shift. By identifying and tracing the way in which the fantastic has been used in British literature as a response to the Enlightenment, I will demonstrate the potential of employing a fantasy hermeneutic for theological discussion. The argument will consider how this literature constituted the first creative response to and critique of the Enlightenment and how it served as imaginative space for the practice of theology in terms of rational and existential crisis focusing specifically on the work of John Milton and George MacDonald. Furthermore, it will establish the liturgical operation of fantasy literature and the fantastic nature of liturgy and their hermeneutical consequences as well as the epistemological foundations of fantasy from Hume through Newman. Lastly it will read Iris Murdoch as an unlikely inheritor of the British fantastic tradition and as an argument for the liberating effect of fantasy on theological conversations. This dissertation constitutes a challenge to the epistemological hierarchies of the Enlightenment which stifle human expression and self-understanding as well as cultural perspective on beliefs as rigid, sedentary and constitutive of identity. The literary fantastic provides a mechanism for exploring all aspects of human experience and consciousness and the development of understanding and belief.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The title of this work is *Theology Beyond Reason*, so perhaps the best way to begin it is by explaining just what is meant by a theology *beyond* reason. Indeed, a small degree of ambiguity is intended here, for if one says colloquially or conversationally that something is “beyond reason,” the implication of the speaker’s attitude is typically one of incredulity. So if a person is inclined to read the phrase in this, or at least to perceive its ambiguity, then this idiomatic function is illustrative of the fact that for many persons theological discourse begins with incredulity or, in better cases, a very enthusiastic hermeneutic of suspicion. However, neither the purpose nor the tone of this thesis will regard theological discourse as something to be incredulous towards. Indeed, it will argue that theological discourse, when channelled through an appropriate hermeneutical framework, bears potential both intellectually and culturally. It will argue from a Post-Cartesian epistemological situation by literary means towards a theological end. The argument is that fantasy is one vehicle which can escape the epistemological hierarchies of Post-Enlightenment philosophy in order to take part in theological discourse. This trend will be traced through British literature from John Milton to Iris Murdoch in order to establish the precedence, possibility and promise of the fantastic as a literary/hermeneutical tool for engagement in a theology which goes beyond reason.

To speak, then, of “theology beyond reason” is to speak of a tradition in theological literature and discourse in which the theologies (or words about God) are allowed to extend further than the reason’s ability to support them. For Christian theology this tradition extends all the way back to the Bible itself and its many works of fantasy and apocalyptic which describe God in ways that can only be processed by the imagination. From the Hebrew Bible one can certainly read books like Daniel in

this way; in Daniel the world of dreams invades and confounds the world of the waking. The dreams were not like mundane experience, but overflowing with the fantastic. The God which Job encounters is also certainly a God beyond reason. Job's constant plea is that either he could speak and make his case before God or that someone could intervene and mediate between the two. When God's character appears his response is to state, in fantastic terms, that Job does not have the requisite knowledge or mental faculties for discussing such things: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (38:2).

The New Testament also offers many works which follow this trend, examining the God who is beyond reason. The works traditionally attributed to St. Paul, arguably the most philosophically aware of New Testament writers, contain frequent challenges to reasoning about God: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Co. 1:20). John the Revelator, exiled on Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," envisioned a fantastic deliverance which, whether eschatological, political, or both, absolutely defied reason and the evidence of his circumstance. Indeed, his situation called for a theology that could extend beyond reason in order to reconcile belief in the lordship of Christ with the inescapability of his exile.

Yet perhaps the greatest works of biblical fantasy are the four gospels themselves. For they centre around events which even today the church must label as "mysteries." There is the mystery of the virgin birth, the mystery of the incarnation and most significantly the mystery of the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is the seat of all fantasy literature in the western tradition. This is explicitly not because it is somehow false, unreal, fabricated or anything of the sort. No, what makes the

resurrection supremely fantastic is its irreducibility, its resistance to analysis, its unreasonability and the fact that, in light of all of these things, it still rests at the very centre of the Christian world view. Thus it makes the supreme claim of fantasy, the claim of ultimate reality.

### **The Great Fissure**

Even though it would be many years until the disciplines of theology and philosophy were formally separated, Descartes's "Dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum" signalled the epistemological shift which would eventually force theological discussion outside of the realm of reason, apart from the philosophical establishment. In it one can see how the basic Platonic philosophical model on which theology depended becomes secularised, egocentric. The idea no longer points to anything sublime other than the existence of the idea itself. There was no inherent ontology to it along any of the old Platonic or Scholastic structures, just experience and the singular, subjective perception of it. The bridge from human consciousness, to the world in which it was thought to be incarnated, to the ultimate Source, or Cause—God—was crumbling like an igloo in the Saharan sun.

One way of reading the relationship between the progressively separate disciplines is that for centuries theology did not "take the hint." Like a schoolboy tag-along it continued on its merry way, acting as if it was still doing the very same job as philosophy, ignoring the consequences of the Cartesian epistemological shift (one which would arguably find its ultimate realisation in Kant). Even today there is a movement in theology to reunite with its ancient philosophical underpinnings. For instance, Louis Dupré minimises the significance of the shift by suggesting that

Descartes' separation "merely drew conclusions from late medieval, nominalist theology which had sharply distinguished the natural order of things, to which philosophy belonged, from the supernatural one dealt with in theology" (Cunningham 1-2). What this hypothesis ignores, however, is the significance of the subsequent increasingly materialist hierarchy which followed Descartes was not present with the nominalists. Even if the nominalists could be said to have significantly separated natural from supernatural, Post-Cartesian materialism makes it dysfunctional by transforming the separation into an epistemological hierarchy.

Thus it cannot suffice to look to the past for answers on how theology can and must function within the social and intellectual environment of the present. Any critique of modernity and its influence on contemporary thought and life must come from the present, not via a bridge built of the brittle material of scorned philosophical metaphysics to an ideological past. This is precisely what John Betz is doing in his essay, "The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination," when he says "I wish to argue (however anachronistically) for the indispensability of metaphysics to theology" (Cunningham 42). It is, of course, the brazen "however anachronistically" which is the problem here.<sup>1</sup> That the present secularism can be deconstructed by its own tools does not, it must be said, mean that the world can yet be the thing that Radical Orthodox thinkers, for example, wish it to return to. Surely theology can still have a relationship with Philosophy, but in order to achieve the kind that many rosy eyed theologians pine for it must exhume the corpse of a Philosophy long since departed.

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<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that theology is no longer viable enough within the academy to be afforded the luxury of being archaic. The more it remains so, the more it allows the force of secularism to objectify it by classifying its nature as either primarily historical or anthropological.

However, it is not my goal to illustrate the way in which some theology has effectively assumed the role of a Miss Haversham, nor to deny even the many positive criticisms which the schools have in fact produced, but merely to note the occasion for the discussion that will follow. For in the void created by an absent philosophy within the discipline of theology, other avenues or means of theological exploration may indeed appear.<sup>2</sup> The subject of this study will therefore reintroduce a former partner of theology which the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment alike drove apart; that is, the literary fantastic.

*Il Sommo Poeta*, Dante Alighieri, provides the definitive example of the Pre-Lutheran, Pre-Enlightenment relationship between these two parties. His masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, is at once purely fantastic and dreamlike as well as intensely and seriously theological. It is this involvement of the theological which allows the purely fantastic to gain its teeth as the literary force of the uncanny—for through the theology, the fictive threatens reality. What is the purpose or potential of such a slippery, elusive and tantalising work? By placing metaphysical questions and thinking within the context of the fantastic, ridiculous, or surreal one essentially combines the rhetorical force of satire or parody with the enduring philosophical potency of Platonism. The purpose is to shock and challenge the assumptions and perceptions of the reader both aesthetically and philosophically. Prickett addresses such phenomena saying:

Finally, in such scenes as these there is the hint (it is no more) of that odd metaphysical frisson that links Dante with this minority tradition of Victorian children's writers, and that transforms fantasy from simple escapism into something much more enduringly rooted in the human psyche. It is present in Canto III of the *Paradisio* when Dante

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<sup>2</sup> This is not, of course, to deny the existence of any relationship between the two, or such sub-disciplines as those called “theology and philosophy” but merely to say the relationship is nothing like what it was in, say, the Middle Ages.

suddenly discovers that the faces he thought were either reflections or figments of his own mind were, in fact, more real and alive than he could easily comprehend. (*Fantasy* 283)

Not only do such moments of “odd metaphysical frisson” link various incarnations of the fantastic to the prototype of theological fantasy as Prickett claims, but they also hint at the connection that fantasy as a literary genre has with theology as a discipline. For in the era of the pre-modern mentality, such duplicitous moments were not in fact rationally or existentially subversive, but rather that which was to be expected under such a Platonic cognitive and philosophical system. It was expected that there should be odd moments of connection between dream and waking, natural and supernatural, for at that time the supernatural seemed to be everywhere and this particular situation was one which could best be communicated through myth. The fact is that it cannot simply be put down to a sorry lack of scientific knowledge which being filled with mythic propositions instead. Indeed, such a proposition entirely misses the point of how myths functioned in ancient human cultures.

One of the most common misunderstandings of myth is to see it as a primitive form of theory, the purpose of which is to account for facts of nature which—with the development of more systematic and objective knowledge—we have subsequently learned to explain in more satisfying theoretical ways [...] The objection to this view is that in the world in which myth and mythic consciousness predominate there do not yet exist any objective “facts,” or therefore any need for theories to account for such facts [...] Myth is a form of integrated perceptual awareness which unites “fact” and “explanation” [...] (Falck 117)

In Pre-Enlightenment literature, modern designations of the “real” and its separation of sacred and secular, scientific and religious would be viewed as false dichotomies. Myths were not solutions to unsolved existential problems, they were the very vehicle for experience itself. Thus, when Betz writes that “Without metaphysics, theology

becomes ‘mere mythology’,” he misses the point of mythology altogether by calling it “mere” and opposing it to metaphysical reality (42).

Yet because of this, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* might not actually be considered as a fantasy in the traditional sense of the genre, for all of the events of his narrative, though dreamlike in their discourse, were regarded in the original environment in which they were written as wonderful, supernatural and obviously fictive but nevertheless communicated on the same terms which medieval Christianity described as the reality of the afterlife. Eric Rabkin argues this point about fantasy from the opposite perspective, that is, a concept which at one point was conceived fancifully but at some later date gains naturalistic plausibility.

It is perfectly conceivable, if not today than a century hence, that normative, shared reality ... may well include the view that plants can talk. But in that future century, *Through the Looking Glass* will still be a fantasy. When Alice says “I wish you could talk!” the implied author behind the text is reminding us today that flowers are preconceived as mute; in future times, that same line may merely remind readers that in 1872, when the book was published, people once saw plants as mute. Those future readers willing to suspend disbelief in mute plants will be rewarded by a delightful fantasy. Those who aren’t willing to follow the signs in the text will throw down the book in distaste. Unless one participates sympathetically in the ground rules of a narrative world, no occurrence in that world can make sense—or even nonsense. (4)

Dante’s work was not fantastic, then, although it could be today if one was deliberate in ignoring its particular *sitz im leben*, but simply a fictive exposition of church dogma. Yet this distinction begs a question which must be at the very centre of this project: what is fantasy?

## A Short Survey of the Fantastic in Literature

In order to identify fantasy's identity today and in the particular context of this thesis, one must first look towards how the word has been used in history. A significant portion of Prickett's work on Victorian Fantasy is dedicated to the etymology of the word and its relatives like "fancy," and "phantasm." In its original use, fantasy could describe an insubstantial dream, whim or vision. More to the point, however, it was the faculty with which the mind could visualise the immaterial or picture that which words could not themselves encapsulate. Yet in all of its usages, fantasy was seen not as something which could be done so much as something which happens—as to the Revelator on Patmos, "At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was the throne of heaven" (Rev. 4:2). According to Prickett's etymology, however, fantasy experiences a change in meaning to match the change in common philosophy during and after the Enlightenment.

With the Enlightenment came both the retreat of the numinous and the evolution of words which might relate to it. It was at this point that fantasy came to meet its newer, darker nature and meaning, stigmatised by its relation to that which was ultimately disgusting to the Enlightened mind—the unexplainable and unreal (Prickett, *Fantasy* 6). Suddenly, "fantasy" became synonymous with superstition, moral corruption and vanity. In nineteenth century it was not at all uncommon for Puritans to denounce all fiction in this manner. Such literature was dangerous to both intellect and to the moral being. In today's usage the word still conveys ideas of the insubstantial, the trivial, the infantile and so forth. Essentially, what happened to the word "fantasy" and its usage in English is representative of what happened to the societies it was couched in. As theology struggled to evolve in a way which could allow its cohabitation with Post-Enlightenment philosophy through the Reformation,

“fantasy” became a symbol of all the superstition which was supposed to be purged from religious life. Protestants attacked the “magic” of the Catholic Eucharist and magic itself became the realm of fantasy.

Luther’s *sola scriptura* gave rise to a tradition which, at its most extreme, forced non-biblical and non-exegetical literary exercise towards the margins. *Sola scriptura* establishes a hermeneutical precedent which was massively important to those who came after and were affected by it. There was no place for Dante in such a world, no place for fantasy which reached beyond the proper and sober groundings of scripture. Of course, fantasies were still permitted mostly in a secular context, but these still held tenuous positions in society. The world was not yet “de-mystified” by the time of Shakespeare and Marlowe who played teasingly with supernatural elements. When they played with witches, ghosts and spirits it gave their audience a true fright. To them, all of these things were still a part of the realm of the possible and their representation on stage, while entertaining in its farce, could be shockingly fearsome as well. There was a certain offense in portraying these beings, in making them real with the magic of the stage. The offense was not against style, manners and good taste but against something much deeper. For this reason such playwrights of the supernatural were obliged to give apologies at the end of such revelry such as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1594):

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumber’d here  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream (5.1.412-417)

Apologies in this vein occur throughout Shakespeare especially and his Renaissance contemporaries. The playwright is Prospero, using his “rough magic” to stir a up a

great display, manipulating his subjects to his own ends.

Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the last latently theological fantasy before the great fissure brought about by Descartes. Strangely, Bunyan was also different from his predecessors like Dante in that he was more conscious about what he was doing in terms of creating a fantasy or fable. That is, the very nature of creating a fantasy had changed to the degree that fantasy was definitely now situated outside of "the real." In a world in which Evangelicals staunchly and vehemently condemned all fiction because of its "unreality," Bunyan proved a notable exception. His work was translated along with the Bible by missionaries and is still one of the most translated works ever written in English. Indeed, since its original printing in 1678, it has never been out of print (Bunyan xiii). Because of the work's widespread popularity, some would see it as the archetypal theological fantasy. The problem with this is that Bunyan adhered strictly to the constraints of allegory in his work, a move that is ignored if not rebuked in the styles of other major theologically motivated fantasists: Milton, Coleridge, MacDonald, Tolkien, Charles Williams and even Lewis. Bunyan intended his work to be interpreted on the strictest terms with reference to his own rigidly formal theological framework. Such an intent is expressed in the conclusion to Part I in which he states:

Now, Reader, I have told my dream to thee;  
 See if thou canst interpret it to me,  
 Or to thyself, or neighbour; but take heed  
 Of misinterpreting; for that, instead  
 Of doing good, will but thyself abuse:  
 By misinterpreting, evil ensues. [...]  
 Put by the curtains, look within my veil,  
 Turn up my metaphors, and do not fail,  
 There, if thou seekest them, such things to find,  
 As will be helpful to an honest mind. (175)

What is truly remarkable in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the guilt that Bunyan express in the writing of it (in contrast to other fantasists). It is as though he strives for the same repentance as Prospero in renouncing his magic. In his apology which introduces the first part of the piece, Bunyan writes of his work:

This book is of such a dialect  
As may the minds of listless men affect:  
It seems a novelty, and yet contains  
Nothing but sound and honest gospel strains. (24)

For Bunyan, the matter seems to be essentially one in which the end justifies unwholesome means. He describes his purpose in this way: “Wouldst thou see a truth within a fable? [...] Then read my fancies, they will stick like burrs/And may be, to the helpless, comforters” (24).

It is not unlikely that Bunyan saw similarities between himself and the author of Revelation, situated as he was in a prison amidst religious persecution. It is not shocking, then, that his purpose of “comfort” resembles that of the Revelator who states “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Although Bunyan himself never claims such divine disclosure, the association is natural. Like the Revelator, his material is entirely astonishing, almost whimsical and certainly dreamlike. Yet, along with his biblical counterpart, Bunyan quietly asserts that his fantasies are built on the very solid foundations of divinely constituted reality and that it is the toils and temptations of life which are, certainly, always the things that seem most real and pressing to mankind:

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. 1:9

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend  
 Can daunt his spirit:  
 He knows he at the end  
 Shall life inherit.  
 Then, fancies, fly away!  
 He'll fear not what men say;  
 He'll labour night and day  
 To be a pilgrim. (303-304)

In this case “fancies” are what have kept previous pilgrims from achieving their goals. But such “fancies” are not here being trifled with. Bunyan is not exhorting against idle daydreaming. Rather, it is with the very “hobgoblins” and “foul fiends” of honest life which he equates fancy. The principle is of course a theological one, stating that everything which faces a man in terms of temptation constitutes a fundamental lie, a fancy. Just as in Eden the serpent offers the first couple a lie, a fantasy which seizes their own imaginations—“Eat a piece of fruit and become as God!” All of the very real things which a reader might encounter, such as government mediated persecution in Bunyan’s immediate case, are trivialised as fancy even though they were the very things which at the time seemed most real and most urgent. Instead, Bunyan points to those things eschatological and eternal as the stuff of sober reality and “hobgoblins” like imprisonment become paltry, trifling things.

In this way, by his work’s Platonic opposition to perceived reality, Bunyan sets himself at least partly within the vein of fantasy literature which this dissertation will study.<sup>4</sup> It also shares in common with the other literature under study the characteristic of being a piece of fantastic fiction which not only recycles and re-clothes in new metaphor standard religious themes, but actually engages in theological endeavour in its own right because of the unique properties of its form. However, it fails to reach the standard of its peers which will constitute the main body

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<sup>4</sup> “The fantastic does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives” (Rabkin 4).

of this research in that it lacks a certain quality of multiplicity which challenges its readers and places them “in the dock.” Fantasy of the highest theological order relies on a certain ambiguity in order to unsettle its readers and draw them into a more vulnerable, malleable position. This conceit relies, as it will later be seen, on a certain degree of surprise. Cavaliero opines “It is because supernaturalism is a rogue element in the house of fiction that it can act as a shatterer of idols” (238).

In stark contrast to his contemporary’s blunt allegory, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* defies easy, simple interpretation. It moves beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy in order to “justify the ways of God to men” (I, 26). Of course, the argument against Milton has been that this is not his prerogative—perhaps why Blake wrote that “he was a true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.”<sup>5</sup> The trademark of Milton’s masterpiece, as it is concerned with this project and fantasy, is that it lends itself to multiple readings in terms not only of its theological significance, but social and political as well. *Paradise Lost* is certainly no allegory but rather a poetic, political and theological meditation by means of fantastic devices. It is this quality that leads the unashamedly blasphemous Milton (blasphemous not only in his poetic enterprise but also, of course, in terms of his more tangible Arianism) to have an even greater influence on his successors than Bunyan’s more straightforward approach. Where Bunyan relies on clarity of symbolism to produce the effect he desired, Milton employs a much more sophisticated labyrinth of ambiguity wherein no matter how long the reader wanders, the minotaur of self-evaluation must be faced in the end.

Milton, in his typical grandeur, provides an ample transition between periods through his development of the character Satan which is a prototype of the Byronic

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<sup>5</sup> Blake, William. “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

hero of later Romanticism. Milton inspired the Romantics like perhaps no other author. It is his use of the fantastic which flavours and moulds the Romantic idea of *imagination* as found especially in Coleridge. Yet, before one leaps into the tumultuous period of the later English Romantics, it suits the purposes of this study to dwell momentarily on what was happening in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the birth of the Gothic novel. Gothic, of course, is not precisely *fantasy*. However, Gothic remains significant here by doing some of the same things as fantasy in terms of its employment of the supernatural.

Though some would quibble with this distinction, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is likely the best starting point when talking about the Gothic novel. Walpole's work provides an interesting stop on our journey for several reasons. Firstly it is interesting in that, although the originator of the genre, it is not a thoroughly Gothic novel. In its dreamlike quality, supernatural plot and with its spiritually charged overtones it is entirely possible that Walpole could be read in the tradition of Milton, Dante and Bunyan. Of the three, however, he is most like Bunyan. This is true not because he shares the same sanctimony of Bunyan (quite the opposite, actually!), but because he similarly perceives the "lowly" nature of his fantasy, although he clearly thinks enough, or little enough, of it to have it published in the first place.

If it is possible to read Walpole as an eccentric, one must admit that he was at least a very self-conscious eccentric. This can be seen, of course, in the fact that he first published the tale under the premise of a translation of a work "found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England," and under the pseudonym of William Marshall (3). Once the piece was revealed under such pretences to a mild but positive reaction, Walpole decided to release a second edition

in which he exposes his own farce. Although such a move would eventually cause a significant backlash against his immediate respectability, it also provided a chance for Walpole to describe what he was really trying to do with the text. To a certain extent, it was simply an exercise in Walpole allowing his imagination to run wild. Writing about himself in the preface of the second edition he states:

Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents of his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions. (7-8)

But Walpole also claimed to wish to illuminate by these means as well.

Speaking in terms strictly referring to the outrageous conduct of domestics in his narrative (but more widely emblematic of the moral of his fable amongst its ridiculous trappings) he writes, “In my humble opinion, the contrast between the sublime of the one, and the naiveté of the other, sets the pathetic of the former in a stronger light” (8). This revelation is important in the history of fantasy especially as it would develop later in writers like Lewis Carroll. That something important could be wrapped in “buffoonery” is an idea which originated with Bunyan, grew with Walpole and finally *climaxed* with the “Nonsense” writers Lear and Carroll (with a significant recurrence in Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*). What is more than this, Walpole’s claim to a deeper seriousness also brought about his confession of the other crucial link his work provides across the gap of the Enlightenment in the tradition of fantasy writing. For Walpole claimed that Shakespeare was the very inspiration for his project and the means by which he undertook it. In the second edition’s preface he writes, “The great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied” (8). His work’s relation to Shakespeare in terms of allusions and inspiration are not the stuff

of uttermost significance in this case, however. It is his work's very dramatic nature, as opposed to true novelistic style, which is the most instructive aspect of Walpole's work.

Walpole wrote not as a Brontë, or Austen, or even Radcliffe. He wrote with prose that resembled a play more than a novel, all of the character's thoughts being spoken aloud and their actions the only communicators of intent or emotion. Michael Gamer noted this especially in his essay introducing Walpole's classic, pointing out the author's previous literary record as an acclaimed playwright and theatre enthusiast and the novel's five chapter structure as an expression of the traditional five act tragedy (xxxix). The important part of this is that Walpole's text has, or at least is supposed to have, the same effect on the reader as the stage has on the theatre audience. An essential aspect in theatre, especially in this period with its very limited props and costuming, was that the audience suspend disbelief for the duration of the performance. How else is Shakespeare's clown to play a character, Wall, and thus say in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

In this same interlude it doth befall  
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;  
And such a wall, as I would have you think,  
That had in it a crannied hole or chink. (5.1.153-156)

What this theatrical quality of Walpole's work does is to establish an important precedent for the reading of fantasy literature in a society which no longer recognises anything fantastic. In addition to the revival of Milton led especially by Blake, Walpole contributes the missing element for the developing Romantic understanding of the literary imagination. In a way, his work reintroduces Shakespeare and the art of serious fantasy. This is the critical requirement for a hermeneutic of fantasy and it is also the point at which theology and fantasy begin to

share something in common. Fantasy, in a way much more pronounced than in other fictive literary forms, must always begin with the willing suspension of disbelief.

Lucy Armitt expounds this principle saying:

The reader is expected to agree with the ideological premise instilled within the narrative and very little in the way of narrative pleasure is available as an alternative if we fail. We may resist the framework, but in the process we are far more likely to reject the entire text out of hand than be prepared to radically interact with it. (29)

Armitt's remark is useful because it helps to bridge the hermeneutical gap between Romanticism with the birth of the Coleridgean suspension of disbelief and Postmodernity with its own seemingly antithetical hermeneutics of suspicion. The claim being made here is not one about objectivity and meaning, but that the best and most interesting readings of fantasy will come through appreciation and respect for the terms and structure of each individual text. This thesis will make the case that the same follows for "reading" theology, building on a postmodern version of the willing suspension of disbelief and moving towards a more creative temporary literary/liturgical belief or, in essence, "make believe." It was the decomposition of Platonism in Enlightenment philosophy throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century that led to the erosion of Christian theology and its relationship to philosophy, its place within the academy and its social significance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On a similar trajectory, fantastic literature was forced to the underbelly of what was considered "acceptable" literature at the time. It was in this situation, godless and mundane, that theology and fantasy, with their common situation and goals, rediscovered one another.

The man responsible for this renewed recognition and rebirth is the master Scottish fantasist, George MacDonald (1824-1905). In MacDonald everything experiences reversals worthy of even the most exemplary of reversal narratives, the

canonical gospels. The pagan fairy becomes a pious angel, the mundane becomes sublime, the ridiculous becomes normative and the foolish becomes wise. The impetus for this trend in MacDonald's work is that for him, not unlike Blake, these dualities are actually more like singularities in a way that can be said to be nothing other than radical. MacDonald went so far as to quip in his *Mary Marston* (1881) that "All pains, indeed, and all sorrows, all demons, yea, and all sins themselves, under the suffering care of the highest minister, are but the ministers of truth and righteousness" (qtd. in Hein 113). Rolland Hein begins to explain this by claiming that George MacDonald had "a strong conviction that a transcendent reality is so closely related to the world of the immediate human experience that it is also immanent in it" (113). Cavaliero echoes this by declaring that in MacDonald "the everyday is shot through with the numinous" (95).

Of course, MacDonald's fantasy and his theology related to each other in other much more complicated (and significant) ways than the mechanistic, but to unpack these at this point would be allowing the cart to get ahead of the horse. What is most important to note presently is the impact that MacDonald had on the subsequent development of what might be loosely labelled "theological fantasy." For he had transformed the entire genre into something new, exciting and inspiring.

With his peer and friend Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) he blazed a path that would be followed quite famously by the likes of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and others. But perhaps it was the massive popularity of these later followers that sounded the death knell for his particular and special type of fantasy. For after these prodigies of the early twentieth century passed, none have been able to truly take up MacDonald's legacy. Upon closer inspection, even the Inklings will be found as poor heirs to the project which MacDonald pursued. However, it cannot be

said that theological fantasy disappeared entirely after MacDonald, nor even that it necessarily parted ways with theology as it had done in the distant past. Yet it was cheapened, simplified, packaged and sullied. Today, the Fantasy market comprises a significant portion of new book printing and sales. One would be hard-pressed, still, to find any of it that lived up to the high literary ideals of MacDonald's work—mostly recycled metaphors on cheap, recycled paper.

In light of these developments, what can be then said of the massive impact and popularity of the recently completed series from authors Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling and their standing in a genre which could be said to be dying or perhaps already dead? Even more to the point, what is the significance of the theology in their work as it relates to the history of both theology and fantasy? In the edition of *Time* published July 27, 2007, Lev Grossman writes “If you want to know who dies in Harry Potter, the answer is easy: God.” Yet a cursory reading of Rowling's work within the context of a liturgical tradition begun in MacDonald indicates that nothing could be less true of the books. The question that faces contemporary fantasy as a genre is one about death. What has died: God, theology in fantasy, or fantasy itself?

This is, of course, the briefest of histories of the interactions between fantasy and theology. It is by no means comprehensive, but rather illustrative of the concerns which this project seeks to address. The goal of this research is essentially theological. To be more specific, it is searching for a way forward in theology that is neither caught up in the philosophy of the past nor clinging to the “death of God” metaphor which is long past its expiration date.<sup>6</sup> To this end, the study of fantasy literature has been introduced as a potential ally for theology or prototypical form

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<sup>6</sup> The recent publishing of Caputo and Vattimo's *After the Death of God* indicates the degree to which this idea has fallen out of fashion.

which theology might indeed employ to escape the morass of its sometimes dismal present. The study shall focus on and around authors for whom fantasy provided an answer and an outlet when their theologising became impossible.

### **Narrowing in on the Fantastic**

Before any more can be said of this project, it is absolutely necessary to become very clear and intentional about what I am referring to as “fantasy.” This has already been alluded to in the form of Stephen Prickett’s etymology of the word from which I argued it is very important to keep and remember the very first usage of the word as the power to “visualize the immaterial or picture that which words cannot themselves encapsulate.” Fantasy is in this way linked to what is called the “imagination” by the Romantics (and not its cognate relative, “fancy”), it is a literary representation of the human ability to employ lateral reasoning, or imagine in the Kantian sense of that world. Thus it exists to challenge and transcend the bonds of the material:

Fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing; its polar opposite is Reality. Reality is that collection of perspectives and expectations that we learn in order to survive in the here and now. But the here and now becomes tomorrow; a child grows, a culture develops, a person dreams. In every area of human thought, civilization has evolved a functioning reality, but the universe has suffered no reality to maintain itself unchanged. The glory of man is that he is not bounded to reality. Man travels in fantastic worlds. (Rabkin 227)

Fantasy, then, is not a function of anti-realist dogma. Rather, it serves to explore those facets of reality and experience which, although present and able to be perceived, are intangible. Apter echoes Rabkin’s sentiment stating, “fantasy also serves as a means of escaping from habitual assumptions and expectations, but the

purpose of this escape is to show how awful, how limiting and imprisoning, the human world is [...] Fantasy provides a point of vantage from which we are shown the gaps in our knowledge” (6-7). As a literary mechanism, fantasy challenges the hierarchy of empirical knowledge, itself an immaterial Platonic type, over and above anything which it deems, rather magically,<sup>7</sup> as unsubstantial. More simply, fantasy is a trope in literature used to challenge a reader’s assumptions. It is not the eradication or elimination of empirical knowledge which fantasy seeks, but rather the enrichment of that perspective. It is not common sense, or science, or rationality which is its target and enemy, but the totalising myth of their singularity and supremacy:

[...] fantasy also serves as a means of escaping from habitual assumptions and expectations, but the purpose of this escape is to show how awful, how limiting and imprisoning, the human world is [...] Fantasy provides a point of vantage from which we are shown the gaps in our knowledge. (Matthews 6-7)

It is this definition of fantasy, not Fantasy as a literary genre, which will provide the scope of this thesis. Defining fantasy in this way allows one to get to the heart of what the fantastic in literature is actually *doing* rather than obsessing about the rules of the genre. It also means, in the scope of this study, that one is free to pursue the fantastic in unexpected directions.

### **Fantastic Potential**

The real power of the fantastic is to inspire wonder. This wonder, then, can liberate both mind and soul and elevate all of existence and experience to something which it could not otherwise be. The fantastic, by its very definition, extends beyond the possible. The many times oppressive and reductive Darwinian psychology is

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<sup>7</sup> Randall Styers investigates in his *Making Magic* the phenomenon in which criticism of things deemed “magical” almost always itself relies on magic.

thrown off and the human is allowed to bask in the magnificence of the possibility of meaning and transcendence, in its own *humanity* and indeed the *humanities* themselves. Critics of religion belonging to the school known as New Atheism often paint religions as the enemy of science and therefore of humanity itself. Of course, the characterisation is patently false as it is not science, once the daughter of theology, but scientism—the true religion of the New Atheists and perhaps much of popular culture—and its hierarchy which fantasy seeks to subvert. Conor Cunningham argues in his essay “Trying My Very Best to Believe Darwin” that this scientism is the superstitious mythologisation of Darwinism based on the rash ontologisation of its theory (100-140). In truth, this scientism has no basis for allying and identifying itself with humanism, or humanity. Its reductionist approach to humanity’s very existence let alone its consciousness is an insult and *de facto* dismissal of things which have been central to its sense of identity and purpose. Humanity’s consciousness has ontological import celebrated in both religion and humanism (if it is not itself a religion) which is greater than scientism’s ability to dismiss it, as David Chalmers rightly points out when he says “you cannot have your materialist cake and eat your consciousness too” (168).

In this way fantasy is a defender of the very basic assumptions of the arts, namely the one stating that humanity’s existence and its consciousness constitute something ontologically greater than their material function. This thesis will argue is that fantasy presents a critique of Enlightenment reason and materialism as well as a literary mechanism which can be instrumental in allowing theology to regain cultural significance. The question which drives it is “How might one ‘do’ theology in an environment which categorically disallows the possibility of a God?” For it seems that Postmodernism, to the extent which it ever really existed outside of Modernism

or continues to exist today, seemed a selective sort of ideology. That is, in culture it was easily adopted whenever a person or group wished to trivialise the claims of an “other” and yet scandalously abandoned in secular discussions of theology. Here pure reason, scientific reason, still reigned supreme (in many cases for both religious and secular thinkers alike). Postmodernism, if anything, represents the greatest experiment in cultural double-think. That which was meant to throw off the last vestiges of Enlightenment reasoning did so by that very tool and picked it up again whenever it appeared to be of use. Ontologically, this hegemony affected popular thought in ways which can only be described as fascist and totalitarian. Cunningham writes of its relationship to theology, “Here we have a perfect example of this pernicious effect [of the fear of religion on intellectual life]: if a phenomenon does not meet the sole *elected* scientific criteria, it simply does not exist” (106).

So while Postmodern (specifically continental) philosophy very much indicates the possibility of philosophical engagement with theological or metaphysical questions, this has not yet been truly realised on a cultural level because of the polemics against religion as that which is anti-humanist and anti-rational. Therefore I propose an avenue through which theology can re-engage itself with wider culture which is not based on a philosophical argument largely inaccessible (by nature or choice) to the public but which is in keeping with the very foundations of theology as a discipline which rooted in narrative and (fantastic) literature. For specifically and profoundly in fantastic literature one allows oneself to consider perceptions of reality and points of view which are not simply strange or different, but constitutionally *other*. This is literary a environment which draws to the absolute forefront the interplay of the suspension of disbelief and the subsequent “make believe” which is necessary for any discussion or consideration of theology for both believer and

nonbeliever. It is this process which can take creative theology forward even in a world in which either God does not exist or everything about him is already known. The fantastic is not for a theology without reason, it is for a theology beyond reason.

The argument will consider first John Milton whose failure to be able to produce a reasonable, yet orthodox theology lead him to experiment with his theology within the fantastic poetic boundaries of his epic *Paradise Lost* and its subsequent interpretation by Blake and the Romantics. In Milton we will perceive the first real critique of what the Enlightenment would become, as well a remarkably *creative* attempt at writing theology. Across Blake and Coleridge's bridge of Romanticism we will arrive at the Victorian fantasists, primarily George MacDonald, but also considering the likes of Charles Kingsley and Dickens, who employed fantasy as a tool for developing a theology which could adequately deal with (or give way to) the pressing, troublesome paradox of death in the nineteenth century. From MacDonald there flows a tradition of fantasy which both *remembers* and *celebrates* the Christian archetype of the Passion as in the *ars moriendi* and functions as a literary liturgy through time from the Victorians, to the Inklings, up through the present in writers like J.K. Rowling. This chapter will examine how fantasy literature, as a tradition, functions liturgically but also how liturgy functions as a fantasy and the consequences of this relationship for our reading of both. Of course, the dangerous (and therefore powerful) part of both liturgy and fantasy is their connection to the real and the possibility that that which was once simply an enactment of a form could produce radical change in the participant. The consequent chapter will confront this danger by examining the epistemological foundations of belief and its relationship to what is called "knowledge" in sceptical believers like David Hume and Søren Kierkegaard, to the confident and dogmatic Cardinal Newman. Lastly I will search for an appropriate

heir to the tradition of the fantastic in literature, offering Iris Murdoch as an example of the enduring potential which fantasy has for doing theology.

## Chapter 2: Milton

*Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first  
 Was present, and with mighty wings outspread  
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss  
 And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark  
 Illumine [...]*

*Paradise Lost*

When one recalls, in very recent history, the astonishing and rather ludicrous reaction of some conservative elements of Christianity to the phenomenon of the *Harry Potter* series by burning, banning and generally condemning the books, it is difficult to imagine a time in which the relationship between faith and fantasy was actually fruitful. To be sure, the Christian literary meta-canon has long since included genre classics like *The Divine Comedy* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and from the modern era there are of course the *Narnia* books and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But these standards, I have suggested, fall somewhat short of the more radical and dangerous thing which I am calling the fantastic in literature. Yet, in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) one has both a work which explicitly and emphatically fits the form of fantasy and which originated the fruitful relationship between theology and literature by way of critiquing Enlightenment reasoning.

It is, for obvious reasons, improper to speak of either fantasy as a category of modern literature or fantasy as a function of literature which actively subverts modernity before the dawn of modernity itself. Yet, even though it is written in the later seventeenth century, *Paradise Lost* is, according to some readers, the first truly

modern work (Altizer 34). What is more, this *Paradise Lost* is remarkably fit to serve as a monument of its unique moment in time, testifying to the factors which precipitated the divorce of theology and philosophy, the loss of what can only be deemed as “Edenic” systematic theologies and the ultimate failure of theology to adapt to the erosion of its epistemological foundations. So then, it is to this epic poem and its controversial author that one must turn in order to sort out the genesis of the twisted, tangled, yet fundamentally productive relationship between fantasy and theology.

One might argue that *Paradise Lost* is not fantastic at all. In fact, it is not Fantasy in terms of genre. The essential reason for this is because, while imaginative, Milton’s epic was seen at its outset as a work which contemplated things which were actually *real*, they existed definitely, even if not within individual or mutual experience. That is, even if no one had ever seen the creation of the world, or Satan’s fall from heaven, it was still entirely possible to accept the *reality* of such a narrative. The strong and necessary connection between common experience and reality was not yet firmly in place in Milton’s time. Leo Damrosch makes this point saying that the uniqueness of eighteenth century literature was that it “insisted on the primacy of reality—of lived experience as shared by a culture—in a way that separates them [the late eighteenth century authors] from the Renaissance before and the Romantics after” (3). There is no *magic* in *Paradise Lost*, no *other world*. Milton’s epic, in the seventeenth century, was at the same time a poem which described something real and one which was entirely fantastic in that Milton was creating, through imagination, a narrative which is anything but explicit in the biblical record he drew from. But, I will argue, the fantastic nature of *Paradise Lost* goes even beyond this, for it also represents Milton’s attempt to escape the constraints which his philosophy and reason

placed on his ability to produce theology. In it, as well as in its explanatory sequel *Paradise Regained* (1671), Milton throws off the chains of reason for the very purpose of examining human reason itself and its *devilish* hold over the mind.

### **Descartes and the Destabilisation of Reality**

The distinction between things which are real and utterly removed from experience and the ultimate reality of shared (then later individual) experience is very much a part of the crumbling edifice of pre-Cartesian philosophy which Milton explores in *Paradise Lost*. That is, after Descartes, it became increasingly difficult to attest to a reality outside of one's own experience, which itself was in doubt. Of course, the evolution of this idea was gradual. At its onset, reality was accepted by proxy. That is, even if *I* have never seen an elephant, if I meet enough people who have seen an elephant, I can accept that elephants exist. What Hume and the rest of the later British epistemological tradition did was to accelerate this "evolution," or the realisation of Cartesian subjectivity by first calling into question this proximate experience and, by degrees, experience itself.<sup>8</sup> For the internality of *cogito ergo sum* is actually much more radical than was initially recognised by the Enlightenment.

Damrosch says of that age:

They lived in an age of epistemological crisis or destabilization, but they were still close enough to a tradition of stable ontology—a 'real' reality that was supposed to be independent of human minds and grounded in the order of the universe—to try to salvage the coherence and reassurance of that older view. (4)

So, in fact, the internality of Descartes's scepticism was greater even than his own, or the later Enlightenment's, ability to maintain it. Descartes would ultimately fall into a

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<sup>8</sup> See below, ch. 5.

mess of contradictions and delusions concerning the existence which he imagined to be justified by an internal dialectical dialogue supported by deductive reasoning.

Watson remarks:

Cartesian metaphysics as a complete system breaks down because of Descartes' inability to establish epistemological certainty; because of the logical incoherence of his ontological dualism; and finally, because just as his physics failed to fit the facts of experience and experiment, so also did his theology fail to conform with Christian hopes and dogma. *In the end, reason fails Descartes.* (ix, emphasis added)

Philosophically, Descartes is placed at the climax of the Scholastic tradition and at the genesis of the rationalist tradition. If it is true that “In the end, reason fails Descartes,” it will be seen that Milton experiences the same, but unlike Descartes this failure of reason was not the final word for Milton.

One of the aspects of *Paradise Lost* which makes it unique as literature and as an artefact within the history of ideas is that it presents an early and imaginative realisation of the implications of Descartes and the emerging Enlightenment. Whereas before Descartes *dialectical* reasoning (built on the Socratic tradition) was the accepted way to truth, after him it becomes ultimately rational and self-referential (and therefore ultimately subject to the fallibility of the individual). Thus, for Descartes, God existed because Descartes reasoned that he did. Yet, Milton sees, this is not a triumph because internalised forms of reasons are actually no better than the formal external, or “objective” ones. In his theological explorations, Milton is truly, as in the words of Mathew Arnold, “wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.”<sup>9</sup> Reasoning God in the way of Aquinas had been made impossible by Descartes, but Descartes' own innovations had effectively made reasoning the existence and nature of God even more difficult. The solution to this

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<sup>9</sup> “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse”

tension, for Milton, had to be a poetic, imaginative and *fantastic* one. The solution was in seeking theology *beyond* reason.

### **The Problem of Milton's Theology**

It could be argued that Milton's success in *Paradise Lost* is equal and attributable to his failure in *Christian Doctrine*. Yet it is doubtful whether, from Milton's own perspective, the failure in question was his own or that of theology itself. Milton's struggle in *Christian Doctrine* is as evident in its mood and tone as it is in its fragmentary nature. In it, Milton struggles to find a reasonable way of speaking about, or explaining God. Time after time he falls into contradiction, heterodoxy or heresy from Arianism to polygamy, but he notes the ineptness of his attempt internally as well as by the implicit self-criticism of never finishing or publishing the text. The problem of his effort is acknowledged within it; Milton writes "No one [...] can form correct ideas about God, guided by nature and reason alone, without the word or message of God" (*CPW*<sup>10</sup> VI, p. 132).

It is this "word or message of God" which becomes central in *Paradise Lost*. For Milton's God was one of great verbal (and biblical)<sup>11</sup> power. Georgia Christopher explains, "In *Paradise Lost* Milton returns to the aesthetic announced in the *Nativity Ode*, in which God's word as explicit doctrine governs the world of the poem" (59). Unlike Satan, Milton's God does not seek to twist and change with his

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<sup>10</sup> *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, hereafter referred to as *CPW*.

<sup>11</sup> It is the very *biblical* nature of the poem which seems to move and excite Coleridge who says, "Is not Milton a *sublimier* poet than Homer or Virgil? Are not his Personages more sublimely clothed? And do you not know, that there is not perhaps *one* page in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which he has not borrowed imagery from the *Scriptures*?" (qtd. in Witterich 157).

rhetoric, rather, it is actual reality that flows from his lips; “Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice/Of God, as with a mantle didst invest/The rising world of waters dark and deep/Won from the void formless infinite” (III, 9-12). His words are not beautiful in their composition as perhaps Satan’s are, but are *themselves* beauty: “Thus while God spake, ambrosial fragrance filled/All heaven” (III, 135-136). Most significantly for Milton’s earthly couple, God’s *word* (λογος) is his son, the salvation of fallen creatures:

Son of my bosom, Son who art alone  
 My word, my wisdom, and effectual might,  
 All hast thou spoken as my thoughts are, all  
 As my eternal purpose hast decreed:  
 Man shall not quite be lost, but saved who will,  
 Yet not of will in him, but grace in me  
 Freely vouchsafed” (III, 169-175).

Christopher expounds the theological significance of this emphasis on the voice, or word of God saying:

Traditionally, Scripture was assumed to adhere to the analogy of faith; that is, it was assumed to be in accord with the classic creeds of the Church. With Luther, the analogy of faith became more specifically an analogy of the word—an analogy of the verbal promise of redemption, or what Milton was to call the “*analogy* of Evangelick doctrine.” Recent studies of Milton’s poetry have tended to blur the hermeneutic between the Reformation and Catholic tradition (4).

It is the Reformation break which allows Milton to write his epic, but is also the very mechanism which partly dooms his project in *Christian Doctrine*. For the new verbal analogy allowed for a dynamic means for *theology*—discourse on God—which was not previously available in a time when theology was dominated by the analogy of faith. Yet, the replacement of Church tradition and authority with the dictum *sola scriptura* also radically constricted this discourse by setting all new texts in competition with the biblical standard, one which was interpreted exclusively via a

Scholastic hermeneutic. So not only did theology have to be biblical, that is, in keeping with the systems of divinity deemed to be expressly communicated by biblical material, but it had to be *reasonable* as well.

For Milton this arrangement was more than problematic, it was entirely dysfunctional. In Milton's mind, theology had a problem which its medium could not fix. The language of reason (prose, by extension) could not communicate a meaningful *theologia* because God could not be reasoned. Every time Milton tried to reason God, he fell into Arianism.<sup>12</sup> So, perhaps, Milton failed as a theologian or alternatively theology failed Milton. For paradox, which lies at the heart of the Christian *gospel*, is a function of literature, not logic. What is clear is that the question which he posed in *Christian Doctrine* is essentially the same as the one he brought to *Paradise Lost*: "if all things are of God, and if matter is both good and incorruptible in its essence, and if that incorruptibility remains so long as free agents do not break the connection that sustains it, why and how should any of them come to rebel or even think that they could?" (Fish xxiv). Milton's shift in medium from theological tract to poetry is significant for more than one reason; it replaces deduction with creation, system with story and reason with poetic authority. Most importantly, it signals a change in perspective for the author and hermeneutics for reader.

In writing theology, in the tradition of Descartes or even Aquinas, the "I" (or ego) is central in its ability to navigate reality and from its experiences become conscious of divine nature. In contrast to this approach, consider the epic narrator's voice in *Paradise Lost*, safely assumed to be more or less in accordance with the

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<sup>12</sup> This point is well documented. See Kelley's *This Great Argument*, Bauman's *Milton's Arianism*, or Rumrich's chapter "Milton's Arianism: Why it Matters" in *Milton and Heresy* (Dobranski and Rumrich, ed.).

author's,<sup>13</sup> which from the beginning assumes a position of radical humility in relation to his subject matter. This is, of course, the voice which pleads "what is dark in me/Illumine, what is low raise and support" and declares that if his "great argument" should bear any authority, it will be because of the inspiration of the heavenly muse which he deems the "Spirit" (I, 17; 22-26). Christopher considers this very point at length:

At the beginning of psychic life stands God's word, not as an Augustinian faculty or light of Reason, but as a word having the specifically literary character that it does in Reformation commentary. Milton thereby suggests that man possesses a *sensus divinitatis*, an innate knowledge of God impressed upon him by divine speech during the earliest hours in the Garden. His Adam differs in this respect from Thomistic man, whose knowledge of God is predicated upon his sense experience and for whom the natural world is an important avenue to God [...] Reformation man, by contrast, is equipped from the outset with an innate [*a priori*] knowledge of God that facilitates his independence from nature [and reason] when it later becomes unreliable. This assumption goes to the heart of Milton's biblical faith and underlies his larger poetic strategies. (147-148)

The *a priori* knowledge of God, or *sensus divinitatis*, which is based on the verbal declaration of God from the beginning as it is realised in the Son, is greater than Thomistic reason because it cannot "fall." What Scholastic reason, then, seeks to achieve in its greatest moment is what Milton's "muse" already claims to be: communion with God. Because it is a moment of kenotic inspiration, which actually moves beyond simple *a priori* knowledge, it also defies hermeneutical difficulties because it itself is irreducible and its expression, i.e. Milton's actual poem, claims no authority outside whatever might leak through of that pure, original *sensus divinitatis*. A distinction here is necessary as well. Even though this thesis will seek to interpret

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<sup>13</sup> According to Fish "Milton assumes a predisposition in favour of the epic voice rather than a modern eagerness to put that voice on trial" (46). If this is true, a rough correlation may be drawn between the author and the voice he chooses to employ as authoritative.

*Paradise Lost* as a critical response to the radical evolution of dialectical reasoning into what eventually becomes the Enlightenment, it is important to recognise that Milton's objection to reason is not against reason itself, but its hierarchical and privileged position in discourse on God. Fish reminds us that

Reason can become 'carnal' reason if its reach is extended to include the mysteries of divinity and the points of faith. If the light of reason coincides with the word of God, well and good; if not, reason must retire, and not fall into the presumption of denying or questioning what it cannot explain. (242)

Thus, reason is only useful insofar as it functions within its capacity and does not attempt to reach beyond its borders and rise above its origin, "denying or questioning what it cannot explain." Christopher also supports such a distinction:

The Reformers, by no means the irrationalists that they have sometimes been painted, considered Reason to be the highest human power, and they referred to it in their commentary as a synecdoche for, and after the apex of, the flesh. (150)

One should remember, however, the ultimate distrust that the Reformers and historical church generally have held towards 'the flesh.' Reason might have been the apex of the flesh to the Reformers, but flesh was also a lowly thing which needs the cooperation and *grace* of God to sanctify and elevate. However, what Milton is not interested in what *he* can do, but what *God* can do.<sup>14</sup> Christopher, again, is useful on this point:

"If one attempts to read *Paradise Lost* while keeping in mind Milton's stated intention to be a doctrinal 'power beside the pulpit,' then any 'literary' epiphany that may arise during the course of reading [...] would be

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting, in light of this, that Milton expends such massive amounts of poetic energy on creating a powerful image of Satan, which will be seen in his own mind and by his own designs ultimately amounts to nothing, while God is allowed to speak 'for himself'—that is, his words and actions are derived from what Milton saw to be purely *revelatory*, i.e. biblical sources.

understood as the work of the Holy Spirit, as the *viva vox Christi* breaking through the text” (16).

Thus, from the very beginning, and as will be seen further, throughout the poem, Milton’s epic voice rebuffs, or at least radically problematises the criticisms of those such as Andrew Marvell who deemed his project would “ruin the sacred truths.”<sup>15</sup> Marvell himself quickly recants saying “Yet as I read, soon growing less severe/I liked his project” and “things divine thou treat’st of in such state/As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.” But what causes this immediate soothing of Marvell’s suspicions? Was it some great, overt and stirring orthodoxy that won him over? Was it, like Coleridge, the sublimity of his biblical imagery? According to Marvell’s own words, it was both the beauty of Milton’s effort and its manner which ‘preserves’ divinity and keeps its author in a state ‘inviolat.’

### **Fantastic Transgression in *Paradise Lost***

Yet how was this accomplished? How did Milton undertake such a potentially explosive project and yet persevere with reputation gilded rather than tarnished? *Paradise Lost* is at times, for many readers across its history, an intensely offensive work. Victoria Silver remarks that it “[has] been offending someone or other for more than three hundred years” (4). For Milton, poetry functions like the later fantasy literature of the nineteenth century. That is, its premise is one which removes the author from criticism inherent to his argument and undertaking. It gives license to ask and answer questions in ways which would be, in a more conservative medium, inappropriate or even transgressive. Just as with Shakespeare’s fools, who often were

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<sup>15</sup> “On Mr. Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ ” (1674).

the mouthpieces of the writer's sharpest satire and most profound wisdom, no offense is taken because no real guilt can be incurred while one is not speaking *seriously*. Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's distinction between serious and non-serious speech acts<sup>16</sup> is foreshadowed by the sanctity with which Milton approached his 'merely' poetic enterprise, a trend which was institutionalised by his successors in Victorian fantasy. What is interesting, though, is the way in which this seemingly untenable arrangement fits so nicely into the hermeneutical mysticism prevalent in seventeenth century Protestantism and Milton in particular. Christopher explains:

Formerly considered, the Reformers' Bible was a referential Möbius strip; it was a word about the word about the Word. What kept religious experience from being a verbal shell game was the belief that when comprehension of the Promise occurs, 'God really speaks to me' and that one's status was thereby subjectively and metaphysically changed. (15-16)

Thus, when Milton invoked the "muse" of the Holy Spirit, he recognised the ridiculousness of the act itself (the bold syncretism of the most important pagan and Christian figures) and the rhetorical ability of this device to disarm potential opponents. At the same time, he was entirely serious in beseeching the help of heaven, hoping that somehow his intrinsically deficient poetry would accomplish a divine purpose.

Even the voice of Dr. Johnson, usually the stalwart opposition to religious poetry, is redundant to Milton's own internal criticism to the same end. In his *Life of Waller*, Dr. Johnson famously condemns what he calls "poetical devotion".

From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy; but this is rarely to be hoped by Christians from metrical devotion. Whatever is great, desirable or tremendous, is comprised in

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<sup>16</sup> See Derrida's *Limited Inc* (1988).

the name of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved. (*Lives* 202)

Yet none of Dr. Johnson's criticisms can go further than what Milton already established in his epic. For in *Paradise Lost*, the very constraints of poetry itself are recognised and utilised towards Milton's end, one that ultimately depreciates humanity's ability to grasp God (through poetry or any other means) and upholds the ultimacy of the transcendent.

The speech Milton places in the mouth of his Satan as well as the language and imagery used to describe him are grandiose to say the least. Satan represents the towering heights achievable at the very limit of Milton's poetical skill. One takes a great risk in choosing any particular example of the sheer grandeur of Milton's language in relation to his hellish subjects. Nonetheless, some subject must be chosen for examination. One particularly grand passage is the majestic description of the demonic rebel army in Book I:

The imperial ensign, which full high advanced  
Shone like a meteor streaming to the wind  
With gems and golden lustre rich emblazed,  
Seraphic arms and trophies: all the while  
Sonorous metal blowing martial sounds:  
At which the universal host upsent  
A shout that tore hell's concave, and beyond  
Frighted the reign of Chaos and old Night.  
All in a moment through the gloom were seen  
Ten thousand banners rise into the air  
With orient colours waving: with them rose  
A forest huge of spears: and thronging helms  
Appeared, and serried shields in thick array  
Of depth immeasurable. (I.536-549)

In a piece brimming with the finest examples of grand poetic verse, this small portion is representative. What is important to remember is that this sort of grandeur is constantly being undermined by its context in reference to demonic spirits as well as

Milton's epic voice which constantly marks the subjects out as rebels, blasphemers and all other manner of disqualifiers. Compared to this, God's speech and that of his son seem quite ordinary and bland. They exhibit no rhetorical or poetic genius, but speak solely with the authority of their persons; for attractiveness, their benefit is the power of redemption itself.

Milton's devices do exactly what poetry is supposed to do; they excite the imagination and engender belief of a certain kind. However, in *Paradise Lost*, these devices are used towards a subtle and surreptitious end which will ultimately allow for Milton to shift the focus of criticism from himself as poet and author to the reader himself. Stanley Fish explains the careful process and its effect on the reader:

One begins simultaneously by admitting the effectiveness of Satan's rhetoric and discounting it because it *is* Satan's, but at some point a reader trained to analyse as he reads will allow admiration for technical skill to push aside the imperative of Christian watchfulness. To be sure, this is not a sin. But from a disinterested appreciation of technique one moves easily to a grudging admiration for the technician and then to a guarded sympathy and finally, perhaps, to assent. (12)

Fish suggests that the tension between the epic voice and the set of assumed values for the characters (God is good, Satan is bad) is not in fact a mistake or an attempt to subvert orthodox Christianity but indeed an attempt to reconstruct the event of the Fall between text and reader instead of Satan and man. In comparing the reader to Adam and Eve he states:

For the reader, the poem is a 'life situation' analogous to the situation of the happy couple in Paradise. The 'dazzling simplicity' of the poem's great moral is the counterpart of the dazzlingly simple prohibition, and the obligation of the parties in the two situations is to defend the starkness of the moral choice against sophistications which seem to make disobedience attractive ('Here grows the Cure of all, this Fruit Divine') or necessary ('What seem'd remediless'). (208)

So it is, then, that every time the reader, simply by opening himself to the beauty and rhetorical force of Satan's character, falls into the camp of the Devil and his company. He demonstrates just the sort of behaviour which Milton sought to rebuke, "the weakness all men evince in the face of eloquence" (Fish 9).

Of course, it remains popular to claim that the evidence of Satan's great character actually overthrows the authority of the epic voice as well as the authority of God himself, being that even his very *goodness* is in doubt.<sup>17</sup> Yet this position displays more than a little modern prejudice as well as just the sort of epistemological faults which Milton seeks to question. The only difference between the antiquarian and modern reader, Fish claims, is that the antiquarian would have come to realise his error whereas the modern is quite ready to make out that Milton is, as Blake deemed him, "of the Devil's party without knowing it." Fish declares:

The insistence on the superiority of showing as opposed to telling is, as Wayne Booth has shown, a modern one, and particularly unfortunate in this case since it ignores the historical reality of the genre [...] Milton assumes a predisposition in favour of the epic voice rather than a modern eagerness to put that voice on trial; he expects his reader to worry about the clash, to place it in a context that would resolve a troublesome contradiction and allow him to reunite with an authority who is a natural ally against the difficulties of the poem. (46-47)

The same principles apply, of course, to the voice of God which is just as frank, anti-logical and authoritative. Again, Fish stipulates "Ideally, the reader should respond to the 'naked proof' of God's word, but the fallen intellect being what it is, a more emotive stimulus is required" (74). Milton calls one to believe and obey, not to feel

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Empson's *Milton's God*.

and to reason;<sup>18</sup> but this is a stumbling block to many, as it should be and as it was designed to be.

Still an argument remains against Fish's reading of Milton and the one from which I am generally operating, and a strong one at that. For if the text speaks "for itself" in a way which seems more attractive than the theoretical intentions of a dead author (which are ultimately unknowable anyway), surely the former negates the latter! William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex* (1983) makes this his primary argument against Fish, and Rumrich joins him in this vein. Fish remarks on this criticism saying:

Kerrigan's complaint is that in my *Paradise Lost* real opposition is impossible, or to put it into the vocabulary of some recent theory, difference is always and already subordinate to the order of the same and is finally illusory [...] Kerrigan identifies what is probably the main criticism directed at *Surprised by Sin*: it describes and attempts to extend into the life of its readers a stifling authoritarianism. (xii)

Yet both of these critics unfortunately mistake authoritarianism in a reading for the authoritarianism of a reading. Of course, Milton himself makes no claim to authority but his epic voice relies on the inspiration of the "Spirit" in order to gain its veracity. In the end, it is not as if Fish assumes that his reading is the only reading of *Paradise Lost* or even that Milton would have thought so. Milton preaches, but he does not assume that all who hear him will repent. It remains the case that "We shall learn Milton's lessons only if we enter the poem on his terms", or as Pope prescribes in his *An Essay on Criticism* (1711): "A perfect judge will read each work of wit/With the same spirit that its author writ" (Fish 46, Lewis 1). Of course, one will never be sure the degree to which he successfully dialogues with an author in this way. However, it is the *Paradise Lost* of history which is important to the study, the poem which at the

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<sup>18</sup> This is a call which will be echoed below in MacDonald and Lewis.

same time proclaimed and wrought and demolished the advent of modernity in literature. Therefore, Fish's study retains great value as even Rumrich admits: "Fish's seminal study [...] is still basic to our contemporary understanding of Milton's works [...] No one has successfully refuted Fish's main argument, not on its own terms" (2-3).

### **"Of the Devil"**

So then, in view of all of this, what could it mean to say that Milton is "of the Devil's party"? One might reasonably assume that Blake meant this not as a criticism but as a great praise, for to him Milton was the archetype, the "true poet". The question is, what was and remains so offensive about Milton which sets pious critics like Marvell and Johnson on edge, even if to win them over later? What in the text is quite so frightening and dangerous, why so attractive to radical theologians like Tom Altizer? Why do Blake and Shelley give him such controversial devotion? Does Milton, for instance, step beyond his means as a poet (or a theologian) by interrogating God and the sacred (biblical) tradition, inventing answers of his own? Has he, in essence, attempted to steal fire from the gods? Has he, like Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, assumed the divine prerogative? Is this why Milton is in league with the Devil? On this question Blake sounds a triumphant "no" and Shelley is blithely silent.<sup>19</sup>

All the same, it is because of Blake and Shelley that the Romantics are wrongly labelled as the era in which the Satanist reading became institutionalised. Far from it, Blake's and Shelley's readings both were unique and exceptional. One

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<sup>19</sup> See below for an enumeration of Shelley's ambivalence on this issue.

commentator remarks that “the Satanist position that has been so often traced to the Romantic criticism is causally, not casually, related to the neglect of Milton’s Romantic critics” (Witterich 5). Of his pious admirers in the Romantic period, Coleridge is perhaps the most significant. He was full of praise and religious admiration, if not also sheer horror at moments, for Milton’s poetry, specifically *Paradise Lost*. Coleridge writes “Is not Milton a *sublimier* poet than Homer or Virgil? Are not his Personages more sublimely clothed? And do you not know, that there is not perhaps *one* page in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which he has not borrowed imagery from the *Scriptures*?” (157). Even the 1823 publication of the heretical *Christian Doctrine* could not entirely shake the poet’s hold on the hearts and imaginations of his nineteenth century readers. Kelley notes:

the reaction of England, now slipping imperceptibly into Victorianism, [to *Christian Doctrine*] was both sharp and varied. The sale of *Paradise Lost* diminished; and for the great poet, some of the orthodox expressed the sadness of men who grieve the departure of a dearly beloved, yet lost and apostate, leader. (4)

Most critics were able to shake the shock of the treatise by alternatively attributing it pseudepigraphy or to an earlier composition date than *Paradise Lost*, leaving the possibility that Milton’s views were reformed to orthodoxy by the writing of the epic (4). In support of this thesis, all of Milton’s seventeenth century biographers note that he composed his ‘System of Divinity’ before *Paradise Lost*, anywhere from 1639 to 1655 while Kelley estimates anywhere between 1658 and 1660 (9-10, 25). This, of course, would be in keeping with the notion that *Paradise Lost* was actually written in response to the failure of *Christian Doctrine*.

A more relevant commentator on the subject then, at least because of his pre-stated prejudice against “poetical devotion,” is Dr. Johnson, mentioned in brief above.

Surely he, if anyone, would agree with Andrew Marvell's first impressions that Milton's project would "ruin the sacred truths." Dr. Johnson's point on the subject is that poetry cannot describe that which is higher or nobler than itself. Milton himself, in a way, makes this point implicitly in *Paradise Regained* when the Son rebukes Satan for imploring him to partake in Classical poetry:

Or, if I would delight my private hours  
 With music or with poem, where so soon  
 As in our native language can I find  
 That solace? All our Law and Story strewed  
 With hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscribed,  
 Our Hebrew songs and harps, in Babylon  
 That pleased so well our victor's ear, declare  
 That rather Greece from us these arts derived—  
 Ill imitated while they loudest sing  
 The vices of their deities, and their own,  
 In fable, hymn, or song, so personating  
 Their gods ridiculous, and themselves past shame (IV, 331-342).

Milton's argument here, in the Son's voice, is not summoned for the sake of its oddly ethnocentric tone! It was not because the Hebrews were so much better at poetry than the Greeks that the Son gives them preference, but rather because their poetry is derived directly from heaven. Again, the supremacy of God's word is seen to trump all other powers. Poetry, then, is not something which reaches up from man to God, but downward from God to man. Therefore only the most directly transcendent poetry is truly poetical, poetry which hearkens from (not to) the Scriptures.

Dr. Johnson must have in fact recognised the congruence between his own and Milton's theory of poetry, for the stern eighteenth Century critic was full of praise for *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps his most outstanding compliment is that "Before the greatness of Milton's poem all other greatness shrinks away" (*Poets*, "Milton" 212). Johnson continues in his artistic, and, more distinctly, moral praise saying:

He had accustomed his imagination to unrestricted indulgence, and his conceptions therefore were extensive. The characteristic quality of this poem is sublimity. He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great [...] In Milton every line breathes sanctity of thought and purity of manners, except when the train of narration the introduction of the rebellious; and even they are compelled to acknowledge their subjection to God in such a manner as excites reverence and confirms piety. (*Poets*, "Milton" 230, 238)

Certainly Dr. Johnson, the most venerable of Milton's critics, should show a measure of disdain were there really a case for Milton's poetic transgression. But, in reality, Dr. Johnson could only make minor criticisms of Milton's enterprise in the midst of his much grander praise of the Puritan poet.

For all of his pious support through the centuries, there is still a resilient strand within Milton studies since Blake, usually a minority, which for one reason or another wishes to revive the Satanist reading. C.S. Lewis, in his preface to the work, even goes so far as to claim that that reading was for a long time dominant, insisting that his friend Charles Williams's lectures on the work represented nothing less than "the recovery of a true critical tradition after more than a hundred years of laborious misunderstanding." Lewis, in his characteristically dramatic tone, goes on to say "Apparently, the door of the prison was really unlocked all the time; but it was only you [Williams] who thought of trying the handle. Now we can all come out" (v-vi). It is likely here that Lewis fell into the error here which Kelly illuminated when he said "more than a hundred years," that of assuming that all of the Romantics were of Blake's opinion. However it is in fact quite likely that the Prof. Saurat, with whom Lewis seems determined to dialogue, represented a majority opinion at the time. This is the opinion, of course, which regards the theological content of Milton's poem as "rubbish" and concentrates instead on the aesthetic value of its Satanic imagery (Lewis, *Preface* 65). Lewis himself noted the loathing with which he received the

prospect of Charles Williams' Puritan reading of *Comus*, which Lewis retrospectively admits he resented doubly because it "placed its importance where the poet placed it" (v).

Of course Lewis' work on the poem was vital in the displacement of the Satanist readings of the time and instrumental to the later development of Fish's reading. He confronts Saurat by saying:

We must therefore turn a deaf ear on Professor Saurat when he invites us 'to study what there is of lasting originality in Milton's thought and especially to disentangle from theological rubbish the permanent and human interest'. This is like asking us to study *Hamlet* after the 'rubbish' of the revenge code has been removed, or centipedes when free of their irrelevant legs, or Gothic architecture without all the pointed arches. Milton's thought, when purged of its theology, does not exist. Our plan must be very different—to plunge right into the 'rubbish', to see the world as if we believed it, and then, while we still hold that position in our imagination, to see what sort of a poem results. (75)

But subsequent to Saurat and Lewis, the latter of whom published his preface in 1942, the Satanist position would be reformed and this time on theological grounds. In 1961 William Empson published his highly critical volume, *Milton's God*. Empson had learned the lesson taught by Lewis so that he admitted that "the subject cannot be viewed in a purely aesthetic manner" (9). However, Empson has still failed to learn all the lessons of the former and thus reduces his work to an exercise in the enumeration of foregone conclusions.

Empson admits from the beginning "I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school, where all my little playmates thought the same" (10). What is important is not that Empson detests what he imagines to be the Christian God, but that he will set aside neither this detestation nor indeed his particular image of God in order to experience Milton's God. For Empson,

there was never any possibility other than that the God of Milton's epic is horrible, and this is the epitome of critical sloth. Furthermore, Empson suffers a crucial lack of decisiveness over just which sort of Satanism he should espouse. He is locked between what he must think to be two desirable readings, both of which, ironically, he attributes to Shelley. Thus it becomes important to recognise that Empson describes his theme or motto as being 'Back to Shelley' (17). This is especially ironic being that Empson had just previously unleashed a scathing criticism of the group which he labels "neo-Christians" or "young Christians" for wishful, retrospective thinking. But this is just an unassuming nook within the great room of backwardness and confusion Empson suffers on the topic. Initially, he espouses a more or less standard response that *Paradise Lost* is brilliant because it forces moral questions and ambiguities onto its readers. He states

That this searching goes on in *Paradise Lost*, I submit, is the chief source of its fascination and poignancy [...] I thus tend to accept the details of interpretation which various recent critics have used to prove the poem bad, and then try to show that they make it good [...] the poem is not good in spite of but especially because of its moral confusions. (11, 13)

Empson uses Shelley in support of this by citing material from the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound* which states "Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil. And this bold neglect of direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of Milton's genius" (qtd. in Empson 16). Yet this position which exalts the ultimacy of ambiguous morality is confused by the other view Empson holds which exalts the absolute evilness of Milton's God. Empson declares:

Hence I find that the attackers [those early twentieth Century critics who reject *Paradise Lost* as "bad" simply because makes God appear to be bad] would find their minds at rest if they took one step further

and adopted the manly and appreciative attitude of Blake and Shelley, who said that the reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad. (13)

What Empson is interested in ultimately, despite his primary nods towards the poetic desirability of moral ambiguity, is the judging of the Christian God. In this he is unlike Shelley in the most dramatic sense. Where Shelley refused to make moral statements, Empson stands on the presumably high ground of his humanist principles.

Rumrich says, somewhat disparagingly, of Empson:

I do not endorse Empson's ultimate position—that Milton struggled sublimely to justify the inexcusably evil Christian God but failed because the Christian God is evil from his foundations. I am not morally certain enough to feel confident in such a claim, whereas Empson came to write his book already convinced that the Christian deity was a relic of Neolithic cruelty. (xii)

The point Rumrich raises here is a valid one, that the foundation Empson's moral condemnations are even more elusive than the metaphysical roots of Christian belief. Empson's implicit response to such criticism is that the pedestal he preaches from is in fact one of necessity. Empson states "[Man] ought to be free to question whether his God is wicked." This statement brings forth the question which must be at the very centre of any discussion of Milton's moral standing in *Paradise Lost*: is man within his rights to question or criticise God? With Milton there is the additional question of whether or not it is permissible to do this by creating a character, "God," which can be questioned and prodded when essentially Milton himself is the God of his poem and not the character which he so names. Dennis Danielson addresses this point with excellent precision:

To undertake a theodicy at all presupposes that we have *some* right or ability<sup>20</sup> to arrive at judgments concerning God's nature and character. Yet no religious theodicy may ever forget that the God being 'judged' is himself the Author and Judge of all Things. Without the first assumption, an attempt to explain God's ways to human beings would be ridiculous. Without the second, it would be blasphemous. (115)

What Danielson prescribes here is that criticism of God should take place within a perspective of faith. This is a literary, logical or imaginative faith, not religious faith. To grant these things about "God"—that he is, for instance, "the Author and Judge of all Things"—is essential to analyze that very figure and not simply a character of one's own invention. This is, of course, one of the major ways in which Empson failed by reading Milton's poem and substituting his own evil God every time he read of Milton's God and then marvelling at the fact that Milton's God and his own looked remarkably similar. On this hermeneutical issue, more will be said in following. But it is appropriate at present to remain with this question of criticising God. For here one discovers Milton's radical congruence with his biblical precedent: not Genesis, but Job.

### **Milton's Use of Job in *Paradise Lost*: The Difficulty of Faith**

Lewis's preface to *Paradise Lost* makes the claim that each poem has two parents: one is form, the other is content. If this is the case, what *texts* might be the parents of *Paradise Lost*? On the formal side it is undoubtedly the works of Homer or Virgil whose contributions to the eventual production of the epic have been

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<sup>20</sup> This is the one stressful ambiguity of Danielson's statement, which should read "right *and* ability," for the right to do something and the ability to do the same are both ontologically and morally different. The difficulty is dissolved, however, by his distinction between the "ridiculous" and the "blasphemous". The first is simply non-functional, the second is inherently evil.

expounded extensively.<sup>21</sup> Yet what can be said to influence the content of *Paradise Lost* for all of its themes, questions, devices and emphases, more than the Book of Job? While the events which take place are written as a subplot to the narrative of Genesis, the focus of justifying God's ways to men is certainly much more like Job. Once one opens his mind to the comparison, the dialogue or confluence between Job and *Paradise Lost* is as extensive as it is readily apparent. Lewis, for instance, found it "novel" that Milton classified Job as a primary epic, although admitting its influence on *Paradise Regained* (*Preface*, 4). How amazing, then, is it that Job has had so little attention with regards to its influence on *Paradise Lost*?

The beginning of similarity between the two "epics" is the fact that both purport to be, or are popularly read as, theodicies while they are actually something different. In Job, it is the faith of the protagonist. In *Paradise Lost* it is the faith of the reader. With Job, at least, this should be quite clear. The reader is, in fact, never made to think of the book as a theodicy but rather he knows from the very first and second chapters that the drama he witnesses is in actuality all about Job's faith and not about God's righteousness in relation to evil. *Paradise Lost* is slightly more mischievous in attaining this goal because it states its aim to "justify the ways of God to man." Fish has been instrumental thus far in demonstrating that this is in fact simply a guise so that the reader will be unaware that the actual object of the poem is himself.

Both pieces do, however, address the question of criticising God as a means to their end. If Job and *Paradise Lost* are about faith, then they are specifically about faith when faith is difficult. In Job, it is made difficult because Job's experiences do not seem to "add up," as it were, to the sum of things which Job knows or believes.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Lewis' own introduction on this point.

Job, like Milton himself, was locked in a struggle with God because “God,” as he knew him, had stopped making sense. Yet he is unwilling to sacrifice either what he believes, that God is just and merciful, or what he knows, that he has not done anything to deserve the suffering which he is experiencing. On the other hand, faith is difficult in *Paradise Lost* because Satan’s lack of faith is so compelling rhetorically and poetically. In both, it is the central conceit of questioning or bringing complaint before God which drives the action in terms of what is being said about this faith. The Book of Job is quite up front in demonstrating that this act is reasonable, not transgressive, saying “In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (1:22). Job goes on to rave and rail against the God who he believes afflicts him and does not answer his inquiries.

Only grant me these two things, O God,  
and then I will not hide from you:  
Withdraw your hand far from me  
and stop frightening me with your terrors.  
Then summon me and I will answer,  
or let me speak, and you reply [...]  
Why do you hide your face  
and consider me your enemy? (13:20-22, 24)

Even yet, Job is allowed to say these things with relative impunity. Whereas God demands sacrifice from Job’s first three companions for their words (42:7-9), Job is not made to do the same. Again, Job is allowed the most nihilistic complaints against life and God; he is allowed to teeter right on the brink of radical, absolute despair:

Why did I not perish at birth  
and die as I came from the womb?  
Why were there knees to receive me  
and breasts that I might be nursed? [...]  
Or why was I not hidden in the ground like a stillborn child,  
like an infant who never saw the light of day? [...]  
I have no peace, no quietness;  
I have no rest, but only turmoil [...]  
Like a slave longing for the evening shadows,

or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages,  
 so I have been allotted months of futility,  
 and nights of misery have been assigned to me [...]

When I think my bed will comfort me  
 and my couch will ease my complaint  
 even then you frighten me with dreams  
 and terrify me with visions  
 so that I prefer strangling and death,  
 rather than this body of mine.  
 I despise my life [...] (3:11-12, 26; 7:2-3, 13-16a)

The type and degree of complaint here has few peers in literature, but one perhaps is to be found in the speech of Satan and his companions in the opening of *Paradise Lost*. They too remark their “dire change” (I, 624), remain unrepentant (I, 96), embrace inevitable misery (I, 141-142) and resolved themselves to the abyss saying:

Farewell, happy fields  
 Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail  
 Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell  
 Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
 A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
 The mind is its own place, and in itself  
 Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. (I, 249-255)

What, then, separates these two characters, Job and Satan? Judging from the raw material of their speeches against God, not much. But generally, and with more clarity as both works progress, there are significant differences between the two which radically alter their posture before God as well as the nature of their actions.

Firstly, one must recognise and not overlook the fact that Job’s misery was not related to his own deeds but Satan’s was. Whereas Job’s ire is based on the fact that, despite his friends’ foolhardy counsel, he was experiencing affliction despite his thorough righteousness, Satan’s suffering is of his own creation. Therefore, it is right that Job question the source and meaning of his suffering whereas Satan has little room for wonder or complaint (which is to say he has none at all). Moreover, the

little hope that Job retains for himself is a righteous one born out of his faith in God's ultimately just nature. Job declares:

He is not a man like me that I might answer him,  
 That we might confront each other in court.  
 If only there were someone to arbitrate between us,  
 To lay his hand upon us both,  
 Someone to remove God's rod from me,  
 So that his terror would frighten me no more.  
 Then I would speak up without fear of him,  
 But as it now stands with me, I cannot. (9:32-35)

Job continues later saying "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15) and

Even now my witness is in heaven;  
 my advocate is on high.  
 My intercessor is my friend  
 as my eyes pour out tears to God;  
 on behalf of man he pleads with God  
 as a man pleads for his friend [...]  
 I know that my Redeemer lives,  
 and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.  
 And after my skin has been destroyed,  
 yet in my flesh I will see God;  
 I myself will see him  
 my own eyes—I and not another.  
 How my heart yearns within me! (16:19-21; 19:25-27)

Job does not understand the origin, nature or purpose of his suffering. He believes in a God who is ultimately both just and merciful yet this belief seems so unreasonable in light of his own circumstances that he is baffled by it. Yet Job's strength rests in his sense and knowledge that there must be something more to the situation than that which he conceives. What he yearns for is a way of communicating with God, that by some arbitrator each might be fully known to the other.

Satan's hope, in contrast, is only to console himself by seeking vengeance:

[Let us] Consult how we may henceforth most offend  
 Our enemy, our own loss how repair,  
 How overcome this dire calamity,

What reinforcement we may gain from hope,  
If not what resolution from despair. (I, 187-191)

Whereas Job's reaction betrays a man deeply rooted in his faithful relationship with God, even when all evidences seem against him he still retains a string of faith, Satan, conversely, demonstrates that his only concern is himself; he is his own god.

This leads to the most important distinction between Job and Satan: Job maintains an orthodox perspective on moral authority while Satan chooses to be his own moral authority. This is the way in which Satan's position in the Miltonic epic becomes ultimately and terminally untenable. What is striking is that the same can be said of the Satanist position, which criticises the wickedness of Milton's God but on grounds entirely unclear. Not only is Empson's position one of indulgence, it is also one which mimics the primary flaw in Satan which Milton endeavours to reveal in his readers as well, that of wrongfully assuming the moral authority to judge between God and Satan. Lewis, in contrast, states that "mere Christianity"—presumably the most basic beliefs and through structures (i.e. worldview) expected to be held in the mind of most of Milton's seventeenth century readers—"commits every Christian to believing that the Devil is (in the long run) an ass" (95). These two sets of assumptions have dictated the development of both the Satanist and the anti-Satanist readings of *Paradise Lost*. Fish singles out the moment of Adam's fall in Book IX as the natural and intentional point at which the flaw of the Satanist position becomes apparent:

This is the terminal point of the reader's education, the trial to which he will be adequate only if he has succeeded in recovering the vision Adam now proceeds to shatter. The specific act he is asked to perform is literary [...] he decides between the philosophical and moral alternatives mirrored in the interpretive possibilities (Adam is right, Adam is wrong) [...] In short, if the reader has applied himself assiduously to the lessons the poem would teach him, and so effected

the purging of his intellectual ray, the superficial appeal of Adam's gesture will be neutralized by his understanding of what it means.  
(271-272)

As the reader recognises that Adam is ultimately wrong in his "gesture," he must also recognise that Satan, too, is wrong and that he himself, inasmuch as he has fallen into admiration for the Devil and assented to his reasoning, has incurred the same guilt. Thus it becomes even more apparent that Fish's thesis, that the reader is indeed the subject of Milton's epic, is legitimate. One's internal nature, the content of his belief and the quality of his character, will determine whether one falls on the side of Satan or the Son.<sup>22</sup> Lewis sides with the God of *Paradise Lost* because he is a Christian. Empson, on the other hand, despises Milton's God just as he despises the God of Christianity. Neither are able to judge Milton's work without being themselves judged.

This conclusive literary moment which Milton has designed for his readers is one of profound introspection. The reader looks into the depths of himself to find what has gone wrong along the way, to discover how it came to be that he was enticed into the Devil's camp. This moment is strikingly identifiable with the experience of Job and his companions as they recollect on Job's experiences and suffering. Their reasoning together, their dialectic, rests on a shared set of assumptions. The main assumption is that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. Job has experienced immense suffering, therefore his friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar conclude that Job has been wicked. Job, knowing with a surety that his friends did not have that he was in fact blameless, could only reach the conclusion that God had transgressed his own nature by wrongfully persecuting Job. Yet these parties charge

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<sup>22</sup> If ambiguity exists as to which position is supported by the authoritative voice in *Paradise Lost*, it will be seen that such a state is rebuked in the strongest terms in the subsequent *Paradise Regained*.

into their conclusions without making a tedious but crucial distinction between events which God causes and events which God simply permits.

Only Elihu, the youngest (and because of this the least wise, or the least *reasonable*), recognises the true failure of this dialectic. He becomes indignant at Job for placing his own righteousness before God and even angrier with the friends for being unable to point out Job's true error (ch. 34-37). Elihu is not better at reasoning than his companions, and it is because of this that he is able to avoid their ultimate error. Whereas the reasoning of Job and his friends was dependent on the accuracy of their assumptions, the totality of their knowledge on the subject, and their ability to make distinctions, Elihu relied only on the most essential authority of his faith—that God is supremely righteous. Job feels the full force of this argument when his own rhetorical effluence is halted by the appearance of the Lord who turns the tables of questioning to Job: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?” (38:1). He does not question the way in which Job has reached his conclusion that he had been wronged, but rather the authority by which Job presumed to question Himself, God:

The Lord said to Job:  
 “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?  
 Let him who accuses God answer him!”  
 Then Job answered the Lord:  
 “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?  
 I put my hand over my mouth.” (40:1-4)

In the conclusion of the narrative, God is much harder on Job's friends than he is on Job. In a way which is profoundly humble for the Creator, he seems to be angrier that they accused Job of wrongdoing than he is at Job for accusing him of wrongdoing. What is significant is that the only one of the entire group who escapes the drama unscathed and without criticism is Elihu. He is different from all the others in that he

never subverted his most essential belief concerning God to his own or anyone else's presumed ability to reason. Job had a faith which went beyond reason, but Elihu had a *theology* beyond reason.

### **Reason in the Dock**

The biblical critique of the use of reason in Job is more implicit than explicit, although it is clear enough when the reader allows himself to share moments of introspection with the protagonist. However, Milton's critique of reason is more overt. In both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, Satan employs his powerful rhetoric in combination with stiff blows of logic which are meant to disarm his hearers (characters or readers). Or rather, Satan's eloquence tricks the rational faculty of his readers into the service of his diabolical wishes. Hume famously warns of this consequence saying "Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection, but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding" (*Enquiry* 79). But, of course, what Satan seeks is not just to "subdue" reason, but to feed it with false assumptions and fanciful pretences. Adam warns Eve of how this might happen in a moment of most ominous foreshadowing declaring:

But God left free the will, for what obeys  
Reason, is free, and reason he made right,  
But bid her well beware, and still erect,  
Lest by some fair-appearing good surprised  
She dictate false, and misinform the will  
To do what God expressly hath forbid. (IX, 351-356)

Of course the peril of which Adam speaks is not simply a failure of reason, but an impious declaration of moral autonomy which would subvert the authority of God's

divine command to the lower power of reason. The same formula is devoutly delivered by Eve when she at last realises that the tree which the serpent is encouraging her to eat from is the same as the one placed under prohibition by God's decree.

But of this tree we may not taste nor touch;  
 God so commanded, and left that command  
 Sole daughter of his voice; the rest, we live  
 Law to our selves, *our reason is our law*. (IX, 650-654, emphasis added)

Here one can see that the prohibition was not the whole of the divine institution, but the whole ordering which placed his authority above all human or earthly authorities—reason being one of those. Thus, the Fall in Miltonic terms is not only the transgression of a command, but the usurpation of divine authority.

Yet Eve was wooed by the serpent's flattery and his rhetorical, aesthetic and, some would add, sexual beauty, so that "Into the heart of Eve his words made way" (IX, 550). The subtle seduction is what opens the door to Eve's great failure in both reason and, more significantly, piety. The reliance on the evidence of experience misleads and misinforms her reason when she concludes that the serpent is the same as those she is familiar with in the garden. "Thee, serpent, subtlest beast of all the field/I knew, but not with human voice endued" (IX, 560-561). She has failed, like Hume who said that "A wise man [...] proportions his belief to the evidence," because the mass of evidence about the serpent did indicate him to be the same as his peers (*Enquiry* 73). In fact, there was only one thing about him that was different, being his speech. Therefore, proportional evidence indicated to Eve that there must be another way of accounting for the serpent's speech other than the possibility that

he was altogether different from the other serpents such that speech was a part of his nature.

Satan, of course, in his guile, had just the right narrative to account for the difference between himself and the other serpents. For, according to his tale, the change was attributable to a particular fruit he had eaten. Of course, the reader knows this yarn to be an outright lie. But Eve should have been wary as well as the tale held no *scientific* sway as the serpent made her believe. For, how did the serpent know that it was the particular fruit that wrought in him the change? Had he tested the effects of other fruits and of particular fruits on other serpents and animals? Had Eve asked, a lie would have surely been the response, but she had further cause to disqualify his testimony if indeed reason was her law. Fish takes exception to this reasoning saying “his [Satan’s] conclusion is premature, since there are not enough instances to provide data for the formulation of a general rule that could anticipate the effect of an analogous action” (250).

Had Eve been thorough in her reasoning, she would have caught this flaw and have been able to expose the serpent’s deceit. Thus the serpent’s lie reveals itself in a logical flaw, but he has already convinced Eve of his rational ability through speech and she, in trust, wonder and awe, allows him to do her reasoning for her. She is mystified by the idea of becoming as intellectually superior to her present state as the serpent from his presumed former state. Herein, reason is touched with a double guilt in that it is both the method and object of Eve’s temptation. Satan addresses the forbidden tree as if it were Enlightenment itself:

O sacred, wise and wisdom-giving plant,  
 Mother of science, now I feel thy power  
 Within me clear, not only to discern  
 Things in their causes, but to trace the ways

Of highest agents, deemed however wise. (IX, 180-184)

As Fish states “With the words ‘discern’ and ‘trace’ Satan proceeds to initiate Eve into the mysteries of empirical science” (250). Eve herself becomes convinced as “in her ears the sound/Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregned/With reason, to her seeming, and with truth” so that she too comes to call the object of her temptation “This intellectual food” (IX, 737-738; 768). The final assault on Eve’s faithfulness would be carried out by the serpent’s reasoning and her affection for it. He instructs Eve to consider the evidence of his own case and experience:

Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,  
 And life more perfect have attained than fate  
 Meant me, by venturing higher than my lot.  
 Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast  
 Is open? [...]  
 God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;  
 Not just, not God, not feared, then, nor obeyed:  
 Your fear itself of death removes the fear. (IX, 688-692; 700-702)

Eve repeats and assents to this line of logic in the further lines 764 through 779. In the end, the beauty of reason itself surpasses, for Eve, the divine command so that the seemingly logical statement “I have not died, therefore you will not die” is allowed to override the authority of the statement “Thou shall not”. It was reason which she was tempted towards, and reason by which she fell.

But it is not as though Eve’s sin was indeed simply a deficiency in her ability to reason effectively. Fish contends “The error of substituting the law of reason and the law of God is repeated by the reader if he regards Eve’s failure as a failure of reason and declines to judge her in accordance with the terms of God’s decree” (254). Indeed, it was a failure to obey the pure, spoken command of God which allowed the mental and rhetorical process that concluded with the consumption of the fatal fruit. Another view is that:

The Reformers' disjunction between God's word and Reason is thus built into the fabric of Edenic life; and trouble first arises in Paradise, not because Eve fails in piety, but because she is not hermeneutically astute enough to keep from confusing the *regnum rationis* and the *regnum fidei*. (Christopher 151)

But the hermeneutical effort in itself was a breach of the divine order of Eden. By the time that Eve had deigned to judge it with reason, she was already as good as degenerate and in league with the one who tempted her. Georgia B. Christopher describes the primary error as such:

Suffice it to say here that Satan takes the Primal Decree of God (5.600-615) as if it were human or creaturely speech, whereas Milton's epic assumes that it constitutes all reality. If we grant this premise, as we would easily grant the premise of a fairy tale, the problem of epic coherence and balance becomes one of accepting this 'literary' point of faith. (60)

Again, for Milton, this pure word or decree from God is absolute and ultimate, constituting "all reality." What does this mean in terms of hermeneutics for the reader? Should the reader be accepting of the authoritarian God of Milton's text and his minion epic voice? Should he capitulate to the same sort of "listen and obey" that is demanded of the Edenic couple?

Emerging in Milton studies especially since the advent and popularisation of postmodern literary theory is a third position in addition to the orthodox and Satanist schools. This third family of interpreters value what they see as the moral confusion and literary indeterminacy native to *Paradise Lost*. This reading falls hermeneutically somewhere between a sceptical and rational refusal to imagine or grant any "literary point of faith" and the absolute acceptance of the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve as well as apologetic readers such as Lewis for whom the demands of the narrative cost nothing at all (that is, it is not difficult for Lewis to grant as a literary point of faith

something which he already assents to). Of this school, John Rumrich is likely the most well known member. He states

The victory of *Paradise Lost*, to the extent that Milton manages it, lies instead in helping us to accept the ambiguity, doubt, and indeterminacy constitutional of our lives, without succumbing to the fear that our existence is meaningless, or worse, malignant. (xii)

It is Postmodernism itself which has brought this reading to bear, for under no other era would literary critics be so jubilant in saying “I do not know” in reference to a reading or opportunity to make a moral judgment. Danielson echoes Rumrich saying:

The correct critical reaction to this dispute is not to imagine that it can be settled—that either Satanists or Anti-Satanists can be shown to be “right” [...] A more reasonable reaction is to realize that the poem is insolubly ambivalent, insofar as the reading of Satan’s character is concerned. (132)

Just as its predecessors, this movement has great things to teach students and casual readers of Milton alike. For with it the focus of critical examination deviates from the text itself and onto the effect of the text on the reader. Usefully, one no longer need wander between two embattled positions of Milton scholarship and their militant residents. In this way Fish’s revolutionary reading, though now quite old and standardised, shows its mettle. The reader is since then encouraged to think about himself as he enters the epic, interpreting its schemes in gestures in terms of his own character and experience. In this way *Paradise Lost* begins to function rhetorically like a sermon with its divisiveness and conviction (for it is still the case that the faithful will likely generate orthodox readings, the unfaithful Satanist readings and the agnostic indeterminate readings), but also like a fable where the audience is encouraged to interpret themselves as somehow a part of or character within the narrative mechanism.

It is reasonable to suggest that Milton would have approved of the personalisation of his text—being himself a great preacher—but it is also fair to say he would have been disappointed with the moral blandness and indecision of readers like Kerrigan and Rumrich. Milton himself was in no way unclear as to which side in his epic should hold the reader’s ultimate sympathies. Although in the age of dying and dead authors, it is not surprising that this characteristic of Milton as both man and poet is often (intentionally?) forgotten. As if he anticipated such an occurrence, Milton reaches out again in *Paradise Regained* in order to try and exert interpretive control of *Paradise Lost*. For while *Paradise Regained* receives less critical acclaim than its predecessor, it certainly seems prudent to consider it as a source of illumination where the potential ambiguities of *Paradise Lost* are concerned.

### **Milton as Fantasy Writer**

Milton is an individual for whom the title of “prophet” is often appropriated.<sup>23</sup> In its usual sense, to say Milton was a prophet is to say that he spoke with great insight towards the moral and political conditions of his time. But there is, of course, another way to use the word prophet and another role for prophets indeed—that of an oracle, or seer of the future. It appears as though Milton was blessed with this quality as well, for *Paradise Regained* emphatically refutes the moral hesitancy of the reader-centred, morally indeterminate reading of *Paradise Lost*. Yet what is important for this study is not so much that it confirms Lewis’ suspicions that “the Devil is [...] an ass,” but that it gives Milton’s most impassioned words against reason—both what it had been and what it was becoming.

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<sup>23</sup> e.g. Kerrigan’s *The Prophetic Milton*

The attack therein is so robust, blatant and even perhaps cynical or malicious that it has quite taken aback those Miltonists who paid little or no attention to the theme as it appeared in *Paradise Lost*. Swanson and Mulryan, for instance, seek to address what is, from their perspective, an interpretive difficulty:

The problem exemplified by these passages can be briefly stated: why did Milton, who had a lifelong devotion to learning, and Greco-Roman learning in particular, so contemptuously reject, in the person of the Son, Satan's temptation to learning? (244)

This is, of course, a very keen point to make about what must seem to be a distressing anomaly within the framework of Milton as he is traditionally understood. But within the scope of a reading of *Paradise Lost* as fantasy, that is, a work which actively seeks to displace "normality" and "reason" with the exceptional, absurd and unique, *Paradise Regained* is not unusual at all. It is, however, useful in cementing a reading of *Paradise Lost* as fantasy. What is more, this "fantasy" is not only claiming that reason is ultimately false, or degenerate, but that it is a temptation towards faithlessness and sin in some of its forms. Satan says to the Son:

[...] be famous, then,  
By wisdom as thy empire must extend,  
So let extend mind o'er all the world,  
In knowledge, all things in it comprehend;  
All knowledge is not couched in Moses' law,  
The Pentateuch, or what the Prophets wrote;  
The Gentiles also know, and write, and teach  
To admiration, led by Nature's light [...]  
Without their learning, how wilt thou with them,  
Or they with thee, hold conversation meet?  
How wilt thou reason with them, how refute  
Their idolisms, traditions, paradoxes?  
Error by his own arms is best evinced. (*Regained* IV, 221-228; 231-235)

Here again, Satan's argument is very logical, but also irrelevant. It would indeed be *fantastic* if the Son of God should need to sit and reason with a Greek thinker in order

to convict him or have any authority over him. It is even more fantastic that the Son should take advice from his adversary on how to fulfil his Father's wishes. It would be most fantastic, then, if the Son should allow himself to be convinced otherwise by the Devil's logic when he has a testament which is supremely better: the word and divine presence of God.

It is perhaps for the purposes of irony that after he has just been tempted to sagacity the epic narrates "To whom our Saviour sagely thus replied" (IV 285). But to note this is only to give a measure of foreshadowing to the tide of irony which is to come in the Son's rebuttal:

Think not but that I know these things; or think  
I know them not, not therefore am I short  
Of knowing what I ought: he who receives  
Light from above, from the Fountain of Light,  
No other doctrine needs, though granted true;  
But these are false, or little else but dreams,  
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.  
The first and wisest of them all professed  
To know this only, that he nothing knew. (IV 286-294)

Here dialectical reasoning itself is shown to be fancy and the "fancy" of the unseen God takes its place. Of course such a thing seems to be lunacy because so many lunatics have said it in order to gain some personal advantage. But Milton's Son is not standing in Trafalgar Square, nor even the temple mount of twenty centuries past. For whatever may or may not be true about the Jesus of Nazareth in history, in Milton his word again "constitutes all reality." The moment any reader refuses to grant this statute of Milton's epic, he ceases to read it as such. Whatever the case, this condition among readers which causes them not just to problematise their hermeneutical relationship to an author, but to eliminate it altogether is a debilitating one when it comes to literature like Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Reading

Milton's literature without Milton is less radical, less illuminating and less satisfying. But now the focus must return to the question which has been resonating throughout this chapter, that is, what is so objectionable about *Paradise Lost*?

While there are differing opinions of the theological merit of the epic, these rarely have much impact on the critic's final opinion of it. For instance, Lewis and Dr. Johnson both picked away at some of what they saw to be the more suspect portions of Milton's theology but were still effervescent over the epic as a whole. The real explanation for why some see so much intellectual danger and literary peril is that it rebelled against reason and reasonability. It transgressed all of society's most fervent warnings about the dangers of fantasy from Erasmus, to the Puritans and all the way through Queen Victoria's reign to the present. The real danger of all fantasy, and that of *Paradise Lost* in particular, is that it asks the reader to believe for a moment differently than what he otherwise believes. It opens up radical possibility and idealism through the imagination.

This study will seek to show that although this sort of activity does produce a critically perilous potentiality—namely, an indulgent form of fundamentalist wishful thinking—awareness of this risk is more than enough to keep that beast in its cage and additionally that the benefits of such a specified hermeneutic for literature and theology far outweigh this danger at any rate. By locating Milton within a tradition of the literary fantastic, it has been shown how fantasy constituted one of the very first artistic and intellectual critiques of the Enlightenment and reason as it had evolved out of Scholasticism. Furthermore, it identifies the long history of fantasy as a critical model for the development and practice of theology beyond reason, focusing on its ability to destabilise intellectual and epistemological hierarchies in order to bring the reader towards a point of critical self-evaluation.

### Chapter 3: Death and Fantasy Literature

### “Death Becomes Her”

Interlopers or uninitiated observers of the Christian cult and tradition often find an unambiguous morbidity about the whole body that borders on the surreal. The accusation of a perverse necrophilia stemming from accounts of Eucharistic celebrations is an ancient one, although manifestly misinformed on the subject. An apology written by the convert Marcus Minucius Felix some time in the late second to third century records a (fictional) dialogue between a Christian apologist, Octavius Januarius, and the pagan Caecilius Natalis which perhaps gives some insight into the kind of wild rumours which were being levelled at the new Christian cult at the time:

Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily - O horror! they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness of wickedness they are covenanted to mutual silence. (177-178)

Even throughout the literature of the Enlightenment, which as such itself eschewed all forms of superstition, the forms and symbols of ancient Christian tradition provided much fodder for the macabre. Notable examples include Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), or James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).<sup>24</sup>

In the contemporary, where familiarity with the essence of Christian belief and liturgy is fairly commonplace and less archaic (and therefore less likely to offend modern sensibilities) than the forms of it satirised in Gothic literature, Christianity still bears about itself a sort of unhealthy preoccupation with death. The paradigm

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<sup>24</sup> Of note in Hogg's work was that it was unique in unveiling the superstitious nature of popular Protestant (specifically Reformed) belief in contrast to the majority of his literary peers which pictured Protestantism as the cool, rational religion of the thinking man and Catholicism as magical and superstitious.

often lends itself to the absurd as in Tina Pippin's recent vampiric reading of the Gospel of John in *The Recycled Bible* (2006).

Yet, the Christian narrative of death and all of its subsequent conversations on that subject are anything but dour, rather they epitomise the eschatology of hope the movement has had since its most ancient foundations. Therefore, when one examines the Christian literature of death (especially ancient and post-Reformation), one finds the religion at its most absurd, paradoxical and *unreasonable*. Consider the words of St. Paul concerning the death of Christ and its implications:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? [...] Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (σκανδαλον) to Jews and foolishness (μωρία) to Gentiles [...] For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom [...] (1 Co. 1:17-20, 22-23, 25a)

For Paul, the paradoxical *scandal* of Christ's death and resurrection was the very core of his Christian understanding. Later in the epistle he declares to the Corinthian church “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,” (1 Co. 15:3-4).

The cross, in the exposition of Stanislas Breton, is not only what “united those whom an apparent wisdom divides, as if there was an ever concealed affinity between the Nothing and the One,” but also the mechanism of ultimate division (3).

Beneath the Cross, the parting of the waters does more than divide two groups. It invites them to declare themselves ‘for’ or ‘against’ the Cross. But in pronouncing a judgment on the Cross, one judges

oneself and thus makes oneself what one is [BD: Just as was seen earlier in Milton's *Paradise Lost*]. Those who see in the Sign of Contradiction only misery and insignificance find folly and infirmity. The wisdom and power they give themselves determine the limits of their prison and the true extent of their fall. To those who overcome the appearance of the world, this 'Nothing' motions from the shadows. It points beyond wisdom and power, making them wiser and stronger by being nothing which it gives. (7)

Such a declaration which so brazenly (and, perhaps, beautifully) contradicts and opposes not only a proverbial incarnation of 'conventional reason' but the dominant infrastructure of human understanding (at least in what is called the contemporary West) has a natural ally in literature—fantasy. The corpus or canon of Fantasy literature is riddled with death narratives which are in form, content and attitude harmonious with the Christian death narrative (both the Passion itself, as well as later New Testament, especially Pauline, accounts of death). What is more, it will be seen that the way the fantastic literary tradition approaches death is a model for the way in which fantasy can itself serve as a medium for working out theological problems which are otherwise impossible to approach.

### ***Ars moriendi* and the Death Fantasies of George MacDonald**

The preeminent example of this must be the work of George MacDonald, not least of which because the acceptance of death, according to Stephen Prickett, is for him "an essential factor in any kind of spiritual maturity" (*Fantasy* 191). This is, in actuality, just the bare beginnings of a much larger edifice which is the thematic effect of death in the novels of George MacDonald. In fact, three of his most prominent works themselves can be considered to be extended death narratives; his first and last

fantasy novels, *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), respectively, as well as the children's fantasy *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871).<sup>25</sup>

Of these three, Prickett maintains that it is *Lilith* which stands apart as a novel which can only be understood as being *about*, in the most complete sense of that word, death. He states:

If *Phantastes* is essentially a *Bildungsroman* [a German form of Romance where the development and self-realization of the protagonist is central], *Lilith* is something for which the English cannot even borrow a word from German, for it is such a rare phenomenon that there is no such thing in either language. If it existed, or were we to coin such a term, it would be *Todsroman*: a 'death-romance'.  
(*Fantasy* 200)

While Prickett singles out only *Lilith* to receive this label of *Todsroman*, it could be argued with good cause that all three novels could reasonably fit such a description. For while *Phantastes* and *At the Back of the North Wind* are both novels which focus on the spiritual development of the protagonist through fantastic experience, the same can easily be said of *Lilith* and, after all, all of the novels do in fact climax and conclude with the deaths of the protagonist so that the entire tale can be summarised as the story of how the protagonist came to die rightly. In the case of these three novels, *Bildungsroman* and *Todsroman* need not be seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, they go somewhat beyond both of these classifications. For in these three novels MacDonald's protagonists are not simply gaining a generalised liberal education or even some sort of self-actualisation. When we consider them as both *Bildungsroman* and *Todsroman* it is clear that the *bildung*, the education or learning, is not abstract but very practical and for a purpose. Therefore they become *Ausbildungsroman*,<sup>26</sup> the

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<sup>25</sup> *At the Back of the North Wind* was first published in a children's magazine in 1868, but was published in book form in 1871.

<sup>26</sup> *Ausbildung* being the German word for training, or specifically vocational training or any education which is meant to prepare one for a specific task.

protagonists receiving an education for the purpose of facing death. They do more than come of age, they prepare to die.

The significance of MacDonald's work on death is manifold. Not only is it an expression of the Christian narrative of death, but the work was written at a time when the theology of death was in crisis and viable resolutions to the controversy were not forthcoming. In this theological crisis, similar to the kind of personal crisis in Milton's theological efforts in *Christian Doctrine*, MacDonald's fantasies allowed him to see the doctrines of the future life and eternal punishment in a new light. Lastly, MacDonald's work would create a precedent for the role and form of death within subsequent fantasy literature which would have such an effect as to change (or at least contribute to) the social understanding of death as a whole.

It is not difficult to speak mythologically or imaginatively about death. Existentially, it is the radical other; rationally, it is irreducible. While one can speak of how death effects the living or how it functions (its role in the biosphere and its results on human society) those things are not the same as being able to determine what it *is* or what it *means* to humanity—corporate or particular. Therefore it is not a massive claim to state that George MacDonald mythologises death in many of his major works, in particular the three which have already been mentioned. What is particularly interesting is that he does this at a time when rational explanations of death seemed increasingly irrational amidst the massive childhood mortality rates and devastating health conditions of Victorian Britain. MacDonald's attempt to theologise about death without defaulting into heterodoxy and still recognising the grim reality of the formerly stated *status quo* required him to turn to fantasy.

George MacDonald, from an early age, was well acquainted with just how hard life in Britain could be during the tumultuous Industrial Age. Spared the filth,

crowding and disease of the nation's booming cities of the time, MacDonald's youth was nevertheless characterised by hardship from the deceptively mundane rigors of trying to scrape together a living from the family's farm in Aberdeenshire to the premature death of his mother when he was only eight, even the loss of his father's leg. George had three sisters and five brothers. Of these, three died before the age of fifteen including his brother, James, who died at eight with no official cause of death listed (Robb, *MacDonald* 1-2, 16). Be this as it may, all of his classmates swore that it was due to the severe beatings he received from the local schoolmaster (Phillips 81). Of the rest, MacDonald's younger brother, Alec, died at the age of twenty six and the youngest of the brood, John Hill—who was the sibling closest to George himself—passed away at the age of 28 by way of the same disease which had taken their mother, tuberculosis. Of MacDonald's staggering eleven children, four died at young ages by tuberculosis which, by the end of his years his son, Greville, explains that MacDonald would label "the family attendant" (470). MacDonald himself had poor respiratory health after a haemorrhage in his lungs in 1850 after which he was forced to take regular holidays to the Mediterranean albeit at great expense to his finances (Robb, *MacDonald* 15).

Death, then, was a very real and particularly dominant aspect of George MacDonald's life. These experiences combined with the hardcore Calvinism of the sort practiced in particular by his severe aunt and abusive schoolmaster pushed MacDonald to an emotional state which made his theology untenable. David Robb says of his condition, "MacDonald's affliction must have contributed substantially to his sense of being a mere transient pilgrim in this world and of the world itself being less than ultimate reality" (*MacDonald*, 16). His first exposure to the nastiness of urban life in Victorian Britain came when as a young man he went to Aberdeen for

university and experienced the conditions there. It was also during this time that MacDonald was first exposed to the universalism that would later influence his own theology so greatly. Although he had been installed as a Sunday School teacher working for the local Congregationalist church, he was removed of his duties, his son Greville presumes, because of fears that he and some other young men in the congregation had been influenced by ‘Morisonianism’ (Robb, *MacDonald* 12).<sup>27</sup> He was famously removed from his first pulpit in Sussex for what the congregation deemed “German ideology”—essentially a form of speculative universalism that he had formed as a reaction to both the severe and violent Calvinism of his youth and the shadow of death which never ceased to hang over his loved ones. Robb relates, “By the time he took over the Congregational church in Arundel in 1850, he appears to have been in the Universalist camp. I think it safe to assume that it was during his undergraduate days at Aberdeen that his rejection of traditional Calvinist doctrines began in earnest” (13). MacDonald’s expulsion from the pulpit was a formative experience for him, placing him thoroughly on the margins of any sort of religious establishment of the time.

While the entire world, especially in its theological circles, seemed to be steaming forward on track with the industrial project of demythologisation,<sup>28</sup> MacDonald trekked steadily in the opposite direction waving happily at those who passed him by along the way. What MacDonald was looking for was a space. This space was to allow him free reign of his imagination such that at least in Fairy Land, if not in his church, he could find resolution to the tensions which weighed on his heart and mind. In this space, free from both dogma and oppressive disbelief,

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Morisonianism’ being after a local Independent universalist preacher, Rev. James Morison.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. *Das leben Jesu* (1836) by David Strauss.

MacDonald was free to pursue something more than the exchange of points in lively debate as many of his friends were interested in doing and instead a lively and imaginative spirituality itself. It must be understood that for MacDonald this fantastic literary project is not about self defence or justification, nor simply vain curiosity, but a serious desire for a potent spiritual way of living that sticks to author and reader alike long after the pages of a book are closed. It is a project which is about life itself and exploring the areas of experience which are continually being pushed to the margins by an ever-modernising world. Whereas modernity has pushed death to the margins of its social consciousness, relegating it to specialised hospices and pensioner care facilities, death was imbedded in the existence of MacDonald and his contemporaries.

The Christian doctrine of death has not been, to be completely accurate, entirely univocal throughout the Church's history. Austra Reinis explains in her work, *Reforming the Art of Dying*, exactly how this came to be:

The ritual of preparing for death was one of the focal points of late medieval death culture. While early Christians appear to have approached death joyfully, with confidence in their eternal salvation, over time this attitude was replaced with one of penitence and fear in anticipation of divine judgment [...] It was believed that one's eternal fate was decided at the moment of death by one's victory over the deathbed demons. All of life came to be seen as preparation for this final struggle. (2)

With this emphasis on the ultimate struggle of the deathbed, the medieval death cult became quite elaborate (and though it changed, the elaborateness of death ritual carried on through the Victorian era), with an entire liturgy devoted to it. The key was to administer the Eucharist and make final confession and penitence before facing the great, final mortal temptation. No matter what one had triumphed over previously in his life, no matter his failings and weaknesses, everything was

subsumed in that final moment where one either clung to his faith and his baptism or otherwise succumbed to fear and unfaith.

Because of the centrality of the sacraments in the death ritual, the presence of a priest at death was essential. However, while the Catholic faith of the time encompassed all of Europe's classes, having a priest by one's bedside through the final hours was only practical in reality for the upper classes. The presence of plague in Europe brought this reality to the fore as the Black Death brought with it the demise of anywhere from a quarter to roughly half of Europe's population (Strayer 257-267). With a plague of this scale, even the wealthy were sometimes being denied priestly visitation during their deaths. The Church finally saw the need to loosen its grip on the liturgy of death and authorised a succession of handbooks which instructed laypersons on how to minister to the dying. The pamphlets were known as the *ars moriendi*—the art of dying well (Reinis 3).

Consequently, the *ars moriendi* always included contemplation of Christ's passion. It was thought that by modelling one's own death as closely after Christ's as possible, salvation would become that much surer. Reinis explains

Devotion to the passion of the Christ is one of the most prominent themes in late medieval theology of piety. According to the medieval theologians who wrote on the subject, the purpose of meditating on the passion was twofold: to experience compassion (*compassio*) with Christ's sufferings and be moved to imitate (*imitatio*) the passion in one's own life [...] Besides assisting the dying person in overcoming the temptations of the devil and the judgment of God, contemplation of the passion of Christ also teaches the dying person the right manner of dying. (35-39)

In this way the *ars moriendi* becomes one and the same with the *ars memoria*. It is through remembering the archetypical Christian death that the Christian disciple is able to model and fashion his own death in a righteous manner. This principle was fulfilled, perhaps, to its truest form in Luther, who "sought to teach (*docere*) that the

three deathbed sacraments [...] signify that Christ's victory is also the Christian's victory" (Reinis 47). Not only is the believer becoming like Christ through death, but he is himself in Christ at death, therefore the two deaths are the same, they are one.

All of this is relevant to the discussion of the three *Todsroman* or *Ausbildungsroman* of George MacDonald, for they themselves serve as a contemplation, a *memoria* as well as an *ars moriendi*, of Christ's death and his declaration that "If anyone would follow me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). His characters, Mr. Vane, Anodos and Diamond all find their crosses and to a varying degree actually model in themselves Christ's Passion.

### **Death, Baptism and the Passion in *Phantastes***

Nowhere is this trend of Passion remembrance clearer than in MacDonald's first novelistic effort, *Phantastes*. Not only does the protagonist, Anodos, himself eventually experiences a death which is itself very much a type of the Passion, but there are several passages and experiences which could be read as types of baptism—baptism itself being a typological re-enactment of the Passion. One such of these is so remarkable that it is worth quoting at length:

I stood on the shore of a wintry sea, with a wintry sun just a few feet above its horizon-edge. It was bare, and waste, and gray. Hundreds of hopeless waves rushed constantly shorewards, falling exhausted upon a beach of great loose stones, that seemed to stretch miles and miles in both directions. There was nothing for the eye but mingling shades of gray; nothing for the ear but the rush of the coming, the roar of the breaking, and the moan of the retreating wave [...] A cold, death-like wind swept across the shore, seeming to issue from a pale mouth of cloud upon the horizon. Sign of life was nowhere visible. I wandered over the stones, up and down the beach, a human imbodiment of the

nature around me [...] a few dead stars began to gleam in the east; the sound of the waves grew louder and yet more despairing. A dark curtain of cloud was lifted up, and a pale blue rent shone between its foot and the edge of the sea, out from which rushed an icy storm of frozen wind, that tore the waters into spray as it passed, and flung the billows in raving heaps upon the desolate shore. I could bear it no longer.

‘I will not be tortured to death,’ I cried; ‘I will meet it half-way. The life within me is yet enough to bear me up to the face of Death, and then I die unconquered’ [...] I reached the end of the low promontory, which, in the fall of the waves, rose a good many feet above the surface, and, in their rise, was covered with their waters. I stood one moment and gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then plunged headlong into the mounting wave below. A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I sank far in the waters, and sought not to return. I felt as if once more the great arms of the beech-tree were around me, soothing me after the miseries I had passed through, and telling me, like a little sick child, that I should be better to-morrow. The waters of themselves lifted me, as with loving arms, to the surface. I breathed again, but did not unclose my eyes.

[...] Soon I fell asleep, overcome with fatigue and delight [...] I was almost glad I had sinned—thus I passed through this wondrous twilight. (*Phantastes and Lilith*<sup>29</sup> 127-129)

There are several things to note about this passage and its baptismal imagery. Firstly is the oppressively wild and dangerous nature of the environment surrounding Anodos. This is nothing like the serene and sanctimonious baptisteries one might find in a church building or cathedral in MacDonald’s time, nor is it even like the placid scene of Christ’s baptism at the Jordan.<sup>30</sup> There on the Jordan, there is no peril, yet this scene which confronts Anodos is nature at its most deadly and untamed. Anodos cannot think of this event as a pleasant dip in the sea, the scene is bleak, tragic and inhospitable. Rather, he consigns himself to death saying “I will meet it half-way.”

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<sup>29</sup> Hereafter referred to as *P&L*.

<sup>30</sup> One thinks specifically of Pasolini’s film *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964) where Jesus kneels before a gently murmuring brook while the Baptist luxuriously, and slightly erotically, bathes Jesus’ hair with water poured from his own hand.

All of the power is gone from Anodos in this situation, the onset of death seems to be absolutely inevitable. “I will not be tortured to death,” he declares before plunging into the water. This, then, is in keeping with the spirit of baptism—one cannot baptise himself, he must meet another half-way and *be baptised*. While it is Anodos who takes the plunge, it is the water which must lift him up, for in the icy depths he relinquishes his will to a much greater power than his own: “The waters of themselves lifted me, as with loving arms, to the surface.”

What is noteworthy about the scene is that while Anodos experiences a “death” here, he is not dead afterwards but alive as in keeping with the normative theology of baptism. Even though he dives into an abyss, there he finds something quite different to the despair which seemed to clutch him while he stoops at the top of the precipice: “I felt as if once more the great arms of the beech-tree were around me, soothing me after the miseries I had passed through”. Uniquely in MacDonald, Anodos is not pictured as passing from life unto life through death as in usual baptismal imagery, but from being dead to being alive through death. Anodos finds himself in the midst of a ‘bare waste’ with nothing to see but ‘mingling shades of gray’ and nothing to hear but the crashing of waves. He is swept up by a ‘cold, death-like wind’ and all he can say for himself is that he was ‘a human embodiment of the nature around [him]’. Anodos does not succumb to death so that he might live *again*, he succumbs to death almost as an act of obedience and miraculously finds himself alive as if for the first time so that he could be ‘almost glad that [he] had sinned’ and thusly pass through ‘this wondrous twilight.’ It is important to note that the twilight which Anodos experiences here is not dusk, but dawn. For Anodos faces eastwards towards the sea and sees the dim sun just a few inches from the horizon. He floats off not into night, but morning and day.

What gives this act of simple compliance and capitulation real symbolic potency is its appropriation and fulfilment of a greater narrative, perhaps metanarrative, which typologically empowers and enfranchises it as a literary conceit. For MacDonald, it is not death itself which liberates but death in Christ. Christ's death, for him, is the archetype which is able to empower all deaths. In Paul, whom MacDonald must have had very much in mind, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" so that it may be transformed in the same way that Christ's own death was transformed (1 Co. 15:26). Paul explains "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Co. 15:42b-44). This must be done, of course, because "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Co. 15:50).

The transition Paul notes from material to spiritual is possible because the disciple of Christ has already done this on an interior, metaphysical level. Paul explains this in his Roman epistle saying:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Ro. 6:3-5)

The message of these excerpts is clear: through sharing typologically and spiritually in the death of Christ in baptism, one is also resurrected with him in spirit and the "body of sin" (6:6) has already died so that when the material body dies it will be as if it is nothing more than a seed planted in the ground, waiting for the glorious warmth of Spring to awake, transformed.

Of course, Anodos does not view his experience as an actual baptism, for what he experiences is a typological form of baptism, not an allegorical equivalent of baptism. Yet even in the biblical record it is “not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God” which constitutes the convert’s obligation to the efficacy of the baptismal liturgy. With Anodos’s forsaking of life and self in his agreement to meet death “half-way,” he embodies the actual repentance and contrition which gives baptism its significance for converts. What he is repenting from is just the attitude that his life is in his own hands and that he is able to master himself alone against death. His fall into the sea was just that, a letting go—“I sank far into the waters, and sought not to return.” While he might not have known it, this pivotal act, the renewed state of mind and spirit, would mean that when Anodos did face death it would not be his end, but only a transition or awakening.

Indeed, sequentially speaking, the death of Anodos comes shortly after his “baptism,” so as to suggest that the experience is indeed meant to prepare him for his last deed. After Anodos’ baptism he is taken to a magical island inhabited solely by an old woman in a cottage—a type of Avalon, perhaps. The old woman comforts and sings to Anodos as he faces a series of trials and visions there. One of the visions is named “Dismay” and finds him trapped alone in the tomb of his ancestors. There he confronts death itself, but as a different man than the one who previously had surrendered himself to the sea. For this is just the sort of trial that Anodos had consistently failed in Fairy Land. He explains his experience as such:

Everything I touched belonged to the dead. My hands fell on the cold effigy of a knight who lay with his legs crossed and his sword broken beside him. He lay in his noble rest, and I lived on in ignoble strife. I felt for the left hand and a certain finger; I found there the ring I knew: he was one of my own ancestors. I was in the chapel over the burial-vault of my race. I called aloud: “If any of the dead are moving here,

let them take pity upon me, for I, alas! am still alive; and let some dead woman comfort me, for I am a stranger in the land of the dead, and see no light.” A warm kiss alighted on my lips through the dark. And I said, “The dead kiss well; I will not be afraid.” And a great hand was reached out of the dark, and grasped mine for a moment, mightily and tenderly. I said to myself: “The veil between, though very dark, is very thin.” (P&L 142)

Although it would seem that Anodos had already overcome death when he fell into the sea, or had been helped to do so, here is another scene in which he must face the same opponent. While this might seem to be a conundrum, it is clearly a dilemma which also plagued the first century church. That is, if Paul instructs his readers to remember their baptisms and live in sin no longer, since baptism indeed was death to sin (Ro. 6:2), then this means that the baptism itself is *de facto* not the last word on death (and how could it be when a material death still clearly loomed?). Rather, it is yet another paradox relating to the “Kingdom of God.” Just as Jesus’ sayings on the kingdom reveal it as something which is here, about to arrive and still coming,<sup>31</sup> the believer begins the resurrection life at conversion must still confront the stumbling blocks of sin and death in a way that can only be described as paradoxical. For even Christ, while defeating death in his Resurrection, “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Co. 15:25-26).

The only way to confront this paradox is by faith, which is what Anodos himself is learning. It is one thing to consign oneself to death, it is an entirely separate thing to believe that death is not the end, but the beginning. That is what Anodos must confront in his ancestor’s chapel and it is also what Martha was tested with in John 11. When she confronts Jesus for not saving her brother, Lazarus, who had died, he responds to her by saying “Your brother will rise again” (v.23). What follows is one of the most remarkable dialogues in the canonical Gospels:

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<sup>31</sup> For examples of each see Mt. 12:28, Mk. 1:15 and Lk. 17:10-37.

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (v. 24-27)

The cryptic truth of Jesus' declaration, while accepted for its face value, seems to be yet beyond Martha. What she does not understand is that Jesus' resurrection is both material and spiritual, present and future—or, rather, that the truth of it confounds both categories. For, when Jesus approaches Lazarus' grave Martha remonstrates him, "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days" (v. 39). Jesus' response to this is potent; "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (v. 40). Clearly, by this point at least, she does believe for before her eyes Lazarus is resurrected and walks again while proclaiming the glory of God to many who did not believe (Jn. 12:10).

While Martha was able to cope with the cognitive weight of acknowledging the proclamations of Jesus to be true, but the oppression of the despair of death was yet to be surmounted. She could assent but not *accept*. Still, any doubts that she might have had were washed away by actual communion with her formerly dead brother. In the same way, Anodos is again comforted by his communion with the dead. For what he finds there is not the depression of decay and stagnation, the usual imagery associated with death, but an interaction with the very experience of vitality. The most intimate moment Anodos experiences in Fairy Land, arguably, is this "warm kiss" which comes to him from the dark. The context is everything here, for while the comfort of the beech tree and the woman in the four square cottage might seem to be measurably more—for they were visibly present and held him and talked

to him—even these great comforts cannot compete with the power and significance of a *warm* kiss from the dead, out of the darkness, when no light was to be seen. It is always the hope that comes from nowhere which is the strongest; deepest despair is where Anodos finds the firmest strength. Anodos here realises that the dead inhabit a world entirely of their own, for they do not cease to exist but rather co-exist in a world in which the “veil between is, though very dark, very thin.”

One thing more must be noted by the comfort Anodos finds at the chapel of his ancestors. This is, he only finds something when he seeks it. He passes over the possibility of nonexistence after death and reaches out to the possibility that something of the deepest tales and myths might after all be true, for he calls out to what he imagines must be the most traditional sort of ghosts, still residing in and about their last resting place. He speaks as though praying to the dead. After he has done this, then only does he receive his comfort, and it is this comfort which sees him back to the old woman’s cottage. Before she sends him on his way she gives him a prophecy that no matter what should come of him, she knows something that should give him peace about it, that it should turn out well in the end, another boon for one who will soon face his greatest test yet.

When Anodos leaves the cottage he begins the last chapter of his existence in Fairy Land. He is soon reunited with an knight errant whom he has encountered twice and whose spiritual guidance he has likewise twice ignored along with the woman he loves, now sworn to the knight. Before his *Ausbildung*, or training, which has been seen episodically through confrontations with death, Anodos would have greeted this turn with spite and contempt. Now, however, he says simply “If I cannot be noble myself, I will yet be servant to his nobleness” (*P&L* 173). It is the

*ausbildung* of death which allows Anodos to make such a kenotic decision, his own self has become inconsequential and his perspective remedied and anchored in “nobleness.” The knight is now interpreted by Anodos Christologically as well, for Anodos says of him “I will serve him, and give him all worship, seeing in him the imbodiment of what I would fain become” (173). While these might be exaggerated terms, they are at least instructive of the gist of what MacDonald is now implying of his protagonist, he has at last occupied happily the role of the faithful disciple. Anodos reflects “I felt that, after all, mine would be no lost life, if I might wait on him to the world’s end, although no smile but his should greet me, and no one but him should say ‘Well done! he was a good servant!’ at last” (173). So thoroughly does MacDonald draw upon both biblical type and language here that it is almost impossible for the initiated reader not to draw lines comparison towards the Jesus of Christian discipleship, even if these comparisons themselves are fleeting.

After these statements of devotion, the only adventure which Anodos recalls is one which would bring this symbolism crashing to the floor, while elevating Anodos himself.<sup>32</sup> The party is confronted with a scene of worship being directed towards a mysterious figure on a throne. The knight is mesmerised by the spectacle and becomes convinced that it must be a true prophet whom the crowd adore. Anodos, on the contrary, suspects something insidious behind it all but is unable to convince his master of it. Unable to allow his master to be deceived, Anodos charges at the mysterious figure and tears it from the throne. Yet, from the recess underneath the

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<sup>32</sup> It is possible to maintain the knight’s Christological symbolism through this passage. For in order for Anodos to be elevated, to be like the knight or even to *become* the knight, it was necessary for the knight to fail. Thus in order for Anodos’ *ausbildung* to be completed the knight would have to fall into error in order that Anodos could forsake himself to save the one in error. In this way Anodos’ ultimate salvation is due to the knight’s taking on Anodos’ own fallibility.

dais which Anodos has now opened leaps a giant beast “like a wolf, but twice its size” which attacks him (176). Anodos knows that he only has a short time before the priests who are around him drawing their swords will cut him down, so he locks his hands around the beast’s throat knowing that in death he will still accomplish his purpose. Anodos recollects feeling the crushing blow from the priest’s weapon and then “A faintness came over me, and my consciousness departed” (177). This was Anodos’s final death, the great battle as described by the *ars moriendi*, the moment that his entire journey in Fairy Land had been preparing him for.

Yet this state would not be a permanent one, for next he realises himself and his surroundings once more:

I was dead, and right content. I lay in my coffin, with my hands folded in peace. The knight, and the lady I loved, wept over me. Her tears fell on my face [...]

“He has died well,” said the lady.

My spirit rejoiced. They left me to my repose. I felt as if a cool hand had been laid upon my heart, and had stilled it [...] The hot fever of life had gone by, and I breathed the clear mountain-air of the land of Death. I had never dreamed of such blessedness. It was not that I had in any way ceased to be what I had been. The very fact that anything can die, implies the existence of something that cannot die; which must either take to itself another form, as when the seed that is sown dies, and arises again; or, in conscious existence, may, perhaps, continue to lead a purely spiritual life [...] I lay thus for a time, and lived as it were an unradiating existence; my soul a motionless lake, that received all things and gave nothing back; satisfied in still contemplation, and spiritual consciousness. (177-178)

Anodos continues, amazingly, to describe how he was taken to his grave and laid into it. He recalls having the whole earth for his body, that he grew into a giant, beautiful primrose which the lady picked, kissed, and held to her chest. “It was the first kiss she had ever given me,” he croons (179). In this experience Anodos concludes his education in Fairy Land, having learned that “it is by loving, not by being loved, that

one can come nearest the soul of another [...] This is possible in the realms of lofty Death” (179).

After this, Anodos’s time in Fairy Land is complete, having “set out to find [his] Ideal” and returning “rejoicing that [he] had lost [his] Shadow” and “Sinking from such a state of ideal bliss, into the world of shadows which again closed around and infolded me” (182, 180). He faced life again in the mortal world again, but this time somewhat instructed (as Lazarus might have done, having once been dead himself and returned to life). For he has already defeated the enemy whose sting is greatest, even if he must face another or many more deaths; he has already overcome despair. His tale concludes with this reflection:

When the thought of the blessedness I experienced, after my death in Fairy Land, is too high for me to lay hold upon it and hope in it, I often think of the wise woman in the cottage, and of her solemn assurance that she knew something too good to be told. When I am oppressed by any sorrow or real perplexity, I often feel as if I had only left her cottage for a time, and would soon return out of the vision, into it again. Sometimes, on such occasions, I find myself, unconsciously almost, looking about for the mystic mark of red, with the vague hope of entering her door, and being comforted by her wise tenderness. I then console myself by saying: “I have come through the door of Dismay; and the way back from the world into which that has led me, is through my tomb. Upon that the red sign lies, and I shall find it one day, and be glad,” [...]

Yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. (182)

What, then, MacDonald leaves his readers with is a sort of astonishing multivalence of fantasy and symbolism. For Anodos has entered a fantasy, been translated from that fantasy to the truer realisation of that fantasy through his death, and now has come back to reality but sees it only as a realm of shadows which he longs to depart

from again and return to the world of fantasy. It is not a case where, upon returning to reality, the protagonist realises that the former experience was, by tautological necessity, unreal. On the contrary, Anodos still believes firmly in the promise of that land and plans to return there, through his tomb. While he doubts, he no longer dismays, and turns his face towards his grave with both confidence and hope in the promise which he was given by the beech tree and the old woman in the cottage.

This kind of belief in an experience as numinous and fleeting as Anodos' time in Fairy Land is shocking in its vitality and demeanour. In this way, the reader *becomes* Anodos by experiencing in form the same transformations and journeys between fantasy and waking reality which the protagonist endured. The goal of a design in which the waking reality does not invalidate the fantasy, but in which the fantasy itself becomes stronger, more potent and virile than the 'reality' is so that the reader might bear the same conviction which the protagonist has arrived at, that one day he will be taken back to that glorious land of fantasy and that moment will be both his death and his birth. But to see the full effect of this mechanism in MacDonald, especially as it relates to his poetic and theological position on death, it is necessary to first consider the two remaining works which have been previously mentioned, *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind*.

### **Reading the Gilded Book in *Lilith***

*Lilith* is a novel which, as has been previously mentioned, focuses so entirely on the subject of death (both theologically and as a narrative device) that it caused Stephen Prickett to devise a new term to refer to its seemingly anomalistic position in relation to normal conventions of genre: *Todsroman*. It is, in fact, the story of how

the protagonist, the aptly named Mr. Vane, must come to terms with his own death. Vane travels into another world from his own<sup>33</sup> where he is met by someone who will serve as his guide through this land and its tasks.

In order to set our examination of the adventure of Mr. Vane off on the right footing, the first thing we must note is the mode and nature of this transport itself. The original method by which Vane enters this other world is by the symbolically overloaded device of a mirror. Of course, MacDonald was sure to have borrowed this device from the ever popular volume of his close friend, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). The recounting of the rich history of the mirror as a symbol must be abandoned here, for it is a tale too long to be told. However, one can quite easily gain a notion of what MacDonald was 'up to' in the use of such a device not only by remembering its direct literary precedent, Dodgson's second *Alice* novel, but also through a brief consideration of what mirrors do. Mirrors are fundamentally tools of reflection, which makes them a powerful symbolic tool of introspection. In this aspect they are often pictured as being terribly powerful, drawing the viewer seductively into the world of reflection to the neglect of the real. One of the oldest examples of this must be the myth of Narcissus and Echo in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the theme runs strongly across many ages. With the Victorian exploration of the subconscious, at least symbolically if not systematically, the mirror was at the forefront of many artistic expressions. The year after *Lilith* was published, Sir Frank Dicksee painted his work "The Mirror" (1896). Yet, perhaps the most important

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<sup>33</sup> Vane remarks of his transition, "I was in a world, or call it a state of things, an economy of conditions, an idea of existence, so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world—which we are apt to think the only world, that the best choice I can make of word or phrase is but an adumbration of what I would convey" (*P&L* 194).

aspect of the mirror is that it does not ever show the world *as it is*, but is always backwards and flawed in some sense and from a particular perspective.

MacDonald's device in *Lilith*, then, is actually not a magical mirror but simply a mirror which acts more perfectly than all others. Whereas a normal mirror would reflect a less perfect image of the world than could be seen with the naked eye, this mirror actually shows a world more accurately than could be perceived with normal human faculties. Some of the symbolism latent in the mirror itself is particularly informative. The one outstanding characteristic of the piece is its frame, "on top of which stood a black eagle with outstretched wings, in its beak a golden chain, from whose end hung a black ball" (P&L 192). Interestingly, this symbol was used in early American furniture as a symbol of victory over (British) oppression. New York's Gracie Mansion, formerly the mayor's residence, to this day bears several good examples of this (Gariti). Is this mirror, then, a gateway to liberty?

Mr. Raven describes his transport as a going through a door, but iterates that "the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!" (P&L 194). But while Vane's situation seems to have changed quite drastically, he actually goes nowhere in a spatial sense. For everything in his present world has a correspondence with something in the last. Mr. Raven, who would also turn out to be a sexton and Adam, was at the same time the librarian from his father's house. His chimney in the previous world might turn up as a tall oak tree in the next. When he asks Mr. Raven where he is he is told "That is impossible. You know nothing about whereness. The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home" (195). Thus he is not given a logical or philosophical solution to his query, but rather, invited to reinterpret his own narrative here, in another setting. To make his home in this

ostensible fantasy would be a typological interpretation of his own self within this new narrative.

In this way Vane's problem becomes not just an existential one, but an ontological one. He reflects "Could it be that I was dead [...] and did not know it?" (*P&L* 196). Soon, however, he finds that the question of his being is not unique to his new surroundings. Rather, he reopens the Cartesian problem and, wisely, offers no answer: "what is there to secure me against my own brain? Can I tell what it is even now generating?—what thought it may present me the next moment, the next month, or a year away? What is behind my *think*? Am I there at all?—Who, what am I?" (198). In this way it can be seen from the beginning of Vane's tale that his journey is not at all spatial and hardly even dimensional. A better way of interpreting it is as a gradual stripping away of illusion. The changes in scenery are hardly the most significant in the hero's transition, it is his growing understanding of himself and his relation towards "other" which is most telling of the *kind* of change he is enduring. Perhaps the most telling revelation of this comes in part of his discourse with Mr. Raven.

"What right have you to treat me so, Mr. Raven?" I said with deep offence. "Am I, or am I not, a free agent?"

"A man is as free as he chooses to make himself, never an atom freer," answered the raven.

"You have no right to make me do things against my will!"

"When you have a will, you will find that no one can."

"You wrong me in the very essence of my individuality!" I persisted.

"If you were an individual I could not, therefore now I do not. You are but beginning to become an individual [...] Perhaps it may comfort you," said the raven, "to be told that you have not yet left your house, neither has your house left you. At the same time it cannot contain you, or you inhabit it!"

“I do not understand you,” I replied. “Where am I?”

“In the region of the seven dimensions [...]” (202)

Thus, by citing seven dimensions Mr. Raven squashes the notion that they have gone anywhere and replaces it with the realisation that there is more to existence than that which seemed apparent to Mr. Vane. Previously there were three dimensions, now there are seven. An interesting observation is to be made about his transition and how he dealt with it. While he asked all number of questions about who he was and where he was and if he was dead, Mr. Vane never asks a ‘why’ for what has happened to him. The answer seems clear to one who has read the novel to conclusion, or alternatively paid close attention to Mr. Raven’s words. Mr. Vane is embarking on a journey of personal development just like all of MacDonald’s protagonists, but in this case it is the development of *personhood* and *selfness* which must be achieved. This could not happen without Mr. Vane questioning the very essence of his existence and this he would not do without being forced to question everything else along with it.

But there is another site of confluence between this altered state of perception (to call it a ‘world’ after having made such distinctions as above seems all too casual) and the mundane. This is, while wandering in his ancestor’s library, who was a “great reader [...] not of such books only as were wholesome for men to read, but of strange, forbidden, and evil books,” Mr. Vane comes upon a book which is only half present which he calls the “mutilated volume” (*P&L* 190). It is the gilding on this book which leads him to his father’s manuscripts which recount meeting Mr. Raven and his experiences with the ‘other world’ as well as the revelation that “A book is a door in, and therefore a door out” (221). While the mode of figurative transport remains to be the old oblong mirror, it appears that books, or at least one book in particular, also occupies some continuum between the two states. This is exactly how it appears to

Mr. Vane, at one point, when Mr. Raven produces the volume not in its ‘mutilated’ form but as a whole. “Where was the other half of it?” he asks. “Sticking through into my library,” Raven replies (319). At last, Mr. Vane arrives at the heart of the matter:

“But,” I returned, hard to persuade where I could not understand, “how is it then that, when you please, you take from that same door a whole book where I saw and felt only a part of one? The other part, you have just told me, stuck through into your library: when you put it again on the shelf, will it not again stick through into that? Must not then the two places, in which parts of the same volume can at the same moment exist, lie close together? Or can one part of the book be in space, or *somewhere*, and the other out of space, or *nowhere*?”

“I am sorry I cannot explain the thing to you,” he answered; “but there is no provision in you for understanding it [...] At the same time you are constantly experiencing things which you not only do not, but cannot understand [...] You accept them, not because you understand them, but because you must accept them: they are there, and have unavoidable relations with you! The fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step—not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding [...] Neither I nor any man can here help you to understand; but I may, perhaps, help you a little to believe!” (326-327)

The mystery of the book is an outstanding and unresolved one. Prickett serves as an example of how it is all too easy to dispose of the symbolic complexity of the gilded book. In his mind “The symbolic significance is obvious: the work of art, in this case *Lilith* itself, reveals to us our own world in a new light” (181). But the book does not function as the mirror does. On the contrary, it contains the story of Lilith, indeed Death herself in this case, but it is not a reflection back on “our own world.” Instead it is a proclamation, a word of power in the form of Lilith’s word of condemnation against herself. When it is read out it both exposes and subdues her and her magic. Who knows what else it might contain or do?

To say that the two-halved volume is indeed *Lilith* is, arguably, true. But it is not the truest thing that could be said of it. For *Lilith*, the novel, does contain a word against Lilith herself and is, in the sense of its metaphorical and fantastic qualities, in two worlds. But *Lilith* in this case is only a type of that book. MacDonald surely does not think that his own volume will keep death at bay and condemn it, but there is one book which could and it is with *this* volume that *Lilith* significantly shares its nature as being “half in, half out.” The archetypal volume which the gilded one of Mr. Raven’s is the Bible, which is, in the revelatory sense, half in this world and half in another. The practical significance of this is that to make sense of the half that is in one’s own world or state, he must procure the other half which lies elsewhere. So then, while it seems that there is a textual love triangle by which the reader is encouraged to interpret *Lilith* in terms of the gilded book and the gilded book in terms of *Lilith* and then the same relationships extending to the Bible. It would not seem to be such a massive step to think, then, that Mr. Raven might speak for the author when he says “Neither I nor any other man can here help you to understand; but I may, perhaps, help you a little to believe!”

Thus, in *Lilith* one finds a repetition of the same sort of structure that was in place in *Phantastes*. That is, a fantasy in which the vision not only replaces the “reality” in a temporary setting, but subverts it entirely. It is not just once, after all, that Vane travels from his house into the other land but many times. He does not dream himself there, for he goes in a mechanical fashion as his waking self. This is MacDonald’s conceit for drawing his readers inexorably into the lessons he teaches his characters—his readers are always in this way invited to become characters. In this he is not original, only in the sense of crafting such an experience through fiction. For the Victorians believed that they themselves could fulfil types in their own

lives—not literary ones, but biblical ones. It was this relationship that played “a crucial factor in the influence of typology on Victorian literature and the arts” (Landow 50). But, as Landow continues to explain, the crucial element in all of this was that “both the symbolising element and what it represents—type and antitype—are real” (51). Thus one could become a ‘Christ’ because Christ actually existed and did all the things the Gospels say he did. But at the end of the nineteenth century, when such an assertion was never more in doubt due to the advent of higher criticism, even biblical typology and its significance for religious readers was waning. Thus, if MacDonald was to encourage a similar model of typological enactment on his readers, he had to make sure that the type was going to be seen as somehow “real.”

The Bible, of course, had not been written off by all. In addition to an everlasting remnant of scholars who refused to capitulate to every stipulation of higher criticism, there was still widespread acceptance of the Bible’s veracity (whatever that meant to those who accepted it) among the laity. What MacDonald needed to do was to establish a function in his novels for people who were not accustomed to such belief, or who would only ever invest such literary belief towards texts within a particular canon. What he needed, of course, was a goodly sized portion of the Coleridgean suspension of disbelief. One must remember, however, that this phrase had not been born into any sort of standard hermeneutic practice at the time and indeed Coleridge himself admits that it is his task as the poet to inspire such a position. Indeed, Tolkien contends that fantasy writing, or “Faerie” as he calls it, should have enough internal coherence and aesthetic beauty as to engender *actual* faith:

Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief*, when the story-maker’s art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been

called ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. 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. 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. If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), other wise listening and looking would become intolerable. But the suspension of disbelief is a substitute for a genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed. (*Tree* 17)

Yet Tolkien’s dictums come to very little in the end in the case of MacDonald’s writing. For, in his time, all fiction was to the more puritanical of Evangelical society “the devil’s invention” and fantasy itself was drawn out for even more criticism by wider society as “unrealistic” and indulgent (Landow 18). In this way, suspension of disbelief must become a hermeneutical prerequisite in order that interior coherence and aesthetic beauty can have the opportunity of engendering much more by way of belief. MacDonald himself strives for both in his own work and reveals that these are methods of conveying something much greater, which is “Truth” itself.

The mind of man is the product of live Law; it thinks by law, it dwells in the midst of law, it gathers from law its growth; with law, therefore, can it alone work to any result. Inharmonious, unconsorting ideas will come to a man, but if he try to use one of such, his work will grow dull, and he will drop it from mere lack of interest. Law is the soil in which alone beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed; and you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts her garments to fit her, and Fancy his journeyman that puts the pieces of them together, or perhaps at most embroiders their button-holes. Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church. (*Orts* 207)

It is in respect to this idea of “Law” that MacDonald has, quite intentionally, the biggest of problems. For it is one thing to create an imaginary world and say things

about it as he does in *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and several other of his children's fantasies. However, just as the reader is shocked in the conclusion of *Phantastes* by the realisation that Anodos does not consider his time in Fairy Land to be a dream, ruse or vision or somehow separate metaphysically from 'the real' but actually fact and experience, he finds again in *Lilith* a continuing pattern in which the imagined world will not let the "real" one be.

Because of this, the relationship between the fantasy of the narrative and the pillars of "Law" and "Truth" must necessarily be more complex and robust than the typical fantasy. In *Lilith*, "the reader *is* the main protagonist, not through identification but simply through interaction with the fantastic itself" (Armitt 32). Thus, the reader joins Mr. Vane's struggle against death, which is in fact a struggle to believe something which he cannot, rationally, be sure of about it. Vane himself struggles against his actual experiences and acceptance of what Mr. Raven says. He even must labour against the ethereal moon, which he finds haunting, but which Mr. Raven has asked to look over him while he wanders in dangerous ignorance.

"That moon is affecting my brain," I said as I resumed my journey.  
 "What life can be here but the phantasmic—the stuff of which dreams are made? I am indeed walking in a vain show!"

Thus I strove to keep my heart above the waters of fear, nor knew that she whom I distrusted was indeed my defence from the realities I took for phantoms [...] (*P&L* 229)

Eventually Mr. Vane becomes too involved with his actual experiences to ruminate on whether or not they are real. He accepts them because they engage him and he must deal with them first or nothing else. With him, the reader is pulled into the episodic nature of the narrative, forgetting for a moment the wider difficulties of the narrative's relation to "reality" just as Mr. Vane forgets what he is there to do which

is, mainly, to die. Mr. Vane must learn, blow by torturing blow, that ignoring Mr. Raven's instructions to die first and the "do" in the same way that the reader must capitulate to the novel first and then learn its lessons and experience its beauty.

What Mr. Vane experiences is a breakdown of his will on *quasi* religious terms (one chapter itself is entitled "I Repent"). But, philosophically, what Mr. Vane encounters is even greater than this, for reason shies away entirely from death and what may or may not exist beyond it. Instinct and experience would indicate that it is to be avoided at all costs, while Mr. Raven's wisdom states the contrary; dying is that which must be done first. For, in his basement-catacombs "None of those you see are in truth quite dead yet, and some have but just begun to come alive, long before they came to us; and when such are indeed dead, that instant they will wake and leave us" (*P&L* 216). The reader has no easier task in coming to believe this contrarian statement than Mr. Vane. In the end, for Vane (and even for Death-Lilith herself) it is the overwhelming futility and horror of the consequences of ignoring Mr. Raven's advice in trying to "do" before he has "slept" that finally brings Vane to his deathbed. What it ever is that might make the reader actually come to "literary" or any other sort of belief in such a perplexing and paradoxical arrangement is a question to be addressed below in subsequent chapters. But for now it is enough to look, finally, at how Mr. Vane actually experiences this death or sleeping, its relationship to biblical typology, its sheer beauty as an idea as well as its place in Victorian theological debate and its role as a catalyst for further fantasy works on the subject.

### **Dying to Get it Right: Death as Spiritual Progress in *Lilith***

In *Lilith*, the structure of death itself is a cruel and mocking mirror to death as it is seen in the ‘real world.’ The Lady of Sorrow declares “Verily, thou shalt die, but not as thou thinkest. Thou shalt die out of death into life” (*P&L* 378). In this way, the death in *Lilith* takes on much of the same baptismal imagery employed in *Phantastes*. Yet, it is clear that this is not only a spiritual death, but a physical one at the same moment which very much frightens Mr. Vane. His death, then, is more like to that of the prototypical Passion crucifixion than the more purely liturgical baptism. It is here that MacDonald’s symbols become their most undiluted. For Anodos is given a final task and therein a final temptation, he journeys to the house of death where he is given a meal of bread and wine to help him sleep, and then walks down to the basement to lie in death beside his parents and his lover, Lona. He is told by Mr. Raven, who by this point is referred to simply as *Adam*, “Every creature must one night yield himself and lie down: he was made for liberty, and must not be left a slave!” (399). Despite the typology’s tendency towards allegorisation, MacDonald’s form in which the protagonist journeys to death through temptation towards death and is comforted by dead friends and relatives before at last facing death alone is one which becomes standard in subsequent fantasy literature.

But MacDonald does not leave a simplified allegory to resolve his readers’ interpretive dilemma as they struggle along with his protagonist to believe. For after Mr. Vane sleeps, he dreams that he wakes and dreams and wakes again. This is the truly innovative aspect of MacDonald’s perspective on death in *Lilith*, Mr. Vane must

continue to die until that death becomes a perfect death, but nothing in terms of improvement can be achieved without first dying. In the midst of one of these cycles, Adam appears before him again and is queried thusly:

“Alas! when I but dream how am I to know it? The dream best dreamed is likest to the waking truth!”

“When you are quite dead, you will dream no false dream. The soul that is true can generate nothing that is not true, neither can the false enter it.”

But sir,” I faltered, “How am I to distinguish betwixt the true and false when both alike seem real?”

“Do you not understand? [...] You *cannot* perfectly distinguish between the true and false while you are not quite dead; neither indeed will you when you are quite dead—that is, quite alive, for then the false will never present itself [...]

“Father,” I said, “forgive me, but how am I to know surely that this also is not a part of the lovely dream in which I am now walking with thyself?”

“Thou doubtest because thou lovest the truth. Some would willingly believe life but a phantasm, if only it might for ever afford them a world of pleasant dreams: thou art not of such! Be content for a while not to know surely.” (P&L 403-404)

Here MacDonald ‘muddies the waters’ by endeavouring to respond to the Cartesian question (as well as Descartes’ failure to answer it sufficiently and the subsequent fracture of theology from philosophy) in a way which is entirely more akin to Hume than what one would expect of a Victorian evangelical preacher. Even more is the narrative’s empirical foundation thrown into doubt when all of the sudden, after at last reaching the Zion-like city, being received by angels and told “welcome home” and gazing even upon the River of Life and the throne of the Ancient of Days, Mr. Vane finds himself alone and again in his very mundane library with the cover of a book closing behind him—the door to the fantasy land shut at last.

Yet, like Anodos, Mr. Vane does not dispense with the experience altogether. Rather, he ultimately deconstructs his experience only to find hope and belief in that which he believes is true and one day will know to be true. The emphasis here is not on the idea that the truth or reality is unknowable, but that man is unknowing. Mr. Vane dialogues with himself on the matter:

Can it be that that last waking also was in the dream? that I am still in the chamber of death, asleep and dreaming, not yet ripe enough to wake? Or can it be that I did not go to sleep outright and heartily, and so have come awake too soon? If that waking was itself but a dream, surely it was a dream of a better waking yet to come<sup>34</sup>, and I have not been the sport of a false vision! Such a dream must have yet lovelier truth at the heart of its dreaming!

In moments of doubt I cry, "Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?"

"Whence then came thy dream?" answers Hope [...] "Whence came the fantasia? and whence the life that danced thereto?" [...]

Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens. When a Man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it to him, that Other is able to fulfil it [...] But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake and shall doubt no more.

I wait; asleep or awake, I wait.

Novalis says, "Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one." (*P&L* 419-420)

What, then, is the great moral of MacDonald's last and perhaps greatest effort in fantasy? What has the protagonist learned and the reader with him? Both have learned, hopefully, the supremely fragile nature of human knowledge and experience.

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<sup>34</sup> For this the reader might find the heart to forgive MacDonald for the tediousness of his symbolism in drawing straight from the, as it were, textbook of Christian eschatological imagery in his construction of Mr. Vane's "last waking". For this would seem to indicate that MacDonald's own view of such imagery is a rather dim one, always acknowledging first and foremost that it is but a dream, a chaotic vision and cannot be compared to the actual grandeur of that which is to come. In this way, MacDonald escapes the bonds of the ugliest sort of creative fundamentalism.

Just as Mr. Vane is unable to categorise his own present experience by the end of the novel, the reader is similarly haunted by an inability to use reason's scalpel to draw a line between reality and fantasy in *Lilith*. For, by the novel's conclusion (if it might even be called that, for the last chapter is even titled "The Endless Ending"), the definition of these two has not simply been blurred but absolutely eradicated.

Yet it is clear, also, that MacDonald's effort is not simply deconstructive. Rather, its goal is entirely constructive in that it seeks to clear away the rubble of 'knowing' (ever an increasingly dilapidated ruin since Descartes, though signs seemed to point to the opposite) to make room for the bulwark of radical hope which is so infectious as to even breed the germs of belief and faith. It is this overwhelming joy of hope from an old and dying man which both amazes and repulses critics like Prickett but also inspires and transform cynics as callous and wizened as C.S. Lewis describes himself to have been before this very joy planted its seed in him. But what was the impact of MacDonald's work? How did it relate to the situations and concerns of his day?

### **MacDonald in Context**

In order to answer these questions it is perhaps necessary to ask yet another question whose solution will be easy enough and which will provide an entry point for discussion of the efficacy of MacDonald's fantasy experimentation. The question to ask is this: why did MacDonald write so extensively and with such great focus on death? MacDonald was actually only one of a wide range of Victorians preoccupied with the matter of death on both a social and theological level. Geoffrey Rowell describes the situation:

Of all the articles of accepted Christian orthodoxy that troubled the conscious of Victorian churchmen, none caused more anxiety than the everlasting punishment of the wicked. The flames of hell illuminated vividly the tensions of an age in which men felt that old certainties were being eroded by new knowledge, and in which an optimistic faith in progress co-existed uneasily with forebodings of the consequences of an increasingly rapid social change. A Bible whose Divine authority had been accepted rather than argued about was battered by the blasts of Germanic criticism and scientific theory, and the particular pattern of Christian orthodoxy which it had been assumed to uphold no longer carried full conviction [...] the hell to which the wicked were consigned, far from being the declaration of God's omnipotent righteousness and justice, became a stumbling block for Christian believers and a weapon of attack for secularists. Yet the need for hell as a moral sanction [...] meant that it could not simply be quietly discarded [...] (vii)

Additional to and compounding the theological dilemma of Christian doctrines on death were the deplorable urban living conditions of the Victorian age which led to pestilence, decay and frequent childhood mortality. For instance, the early nineteenth century recorded in Britain infant mortality rates between twenty and thirty percent (Millward and Bell 699). The issue was so concerning that it drew attention from the most prominent members of society, not just in the form of evangelical social reforms but also in literature, especially fantasy literature. Certainly Dickens's classic of 1843, *A Christmas Carol*, toiled against the rampant injustice of the poverty which was slaying so many children before they ever even reached adolescence. In this fantasy, it is clear that the mechanism provides not just for the life of one Tiny Tim, but even more so for Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge.

Dickens' classic theme continued to be developed with Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, finished in 1863, being perhaps the most notable beneficiary of the tradition. Kingsley's work concerns the life of a boy name Tom who, at the tale's beginning, is under the cruel tutelage of a foul-mouthed drunkard of a chimney-sweep. Now, in *The Water Babies* one is told that "your soul makes your body, just

as a snail makes his shell” and Mr. Grimes, as his name coyly implies, is a very dirty man both in and outwardly (60). Indeed, his whole business was dirty, for not only was there no end to dirt and soot that the chimney-sweep must expose himself to and wallow in. But the impression during that time in England was that to be a chimney-sweep was to be a petty criminal by another name. Indeed, the novel begins with Tom and Mr. Grimes receiving new work from the Duke of Wellington “for his old chimney-sweep was gone to prison, and the chimneys wanted sweeping” (5). It is in his house, then, that Tom sees himself in a mirror and “for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger” (21). Under Mr. Grimes’ insidious tutelage, Tom had become a very wicked boy—and now he knew it!

Eventually Tom ran away from the house and his cruel master to find a cottage in a sequestered valley in which resided a caring but severe old schoolmarm. She received him despite her qualms about having chimney-sweeps in her household, gave him milk to drink and laid him down to sleep. But Tom was too hot and restless to sleep, he could not stop thinking of the babbling brook outside the cottage and how much he would like to dive in, take a drink and wash himself off. He wandered in a half-sleep to the water’s edge murmuring “I must be clean, I must be clean” and got in (Kingsley 42). This, then, is where Tom’s real adventure begins for he is transformed into a little river sprite, or ‘water baby’ as Kingsley dictated, and went on to pursue a journey of moral transformation. Of course, when his lesson is finally learned to its fullest and he is at last made ‘clean’ Tom becomes ‘big’ again and goes on to be a man of science while never forgetting his lessons learned.

In Kingsley, death and death's cold river are treated as just two more environments for curious exploration. Tom is taken with fever and doesn't know when he enters the river that he is actually entering into death, because it seems to be teeming with life. This interpretation of death is moulded to the evolving self-perception and indeed world view which emphasised a spirit of knowledge and learning. The whole world seemed to be being stripped of its mystery and its churches along with it. Kingsley places death directly within these terms of existence, challenging that death is in fact the last frontier of human exploration. Yet, like any other frontier, it could only be explored by going there. This is why he teasingly and coyly instructs that "this is a fairytale, and all fun and pretence; and that you are not to believe one word of it, even if it is true" (54).

Of course it is unlikely that Kingsley was quite so serious in his self-criticism, as is revealed by the irony of not believing something despite it being true. Yet he interestingly couches his narrative in these terms to arouse the scientific spirit of exploration. Of course, what Tom learns about is not his surroundings so much as himself. This, then, is the sort of knowledge which, to change the world, changes a man. What is truly notable about Kingsley's work is the pains it takes to view the evil of social injustice and childhood death while at the same time upholding the potential hope and mercy that the death itself might offer. For it is in this death alone that Tom can find a better life, indeed life itself. By picturing this death in terms of a baptism where afterwards one re-enters the same world he has just previously departed, Kingsley states that it is death which must instruct all men towards moral growth whether the death be real or liturgical.

The theological idea that Kingsley toys with here is a form of universalism. It was certainly an idea which was gaining its spurs within the wider theological and ecclesial debate throughout the nineteenth century, but what is significant is that Kingsley imbeds his argument in narrative, not dialectic. One finds the same in the fantasy works of George MacDonald and with an even greater similarity in his *At the Back of the North Wind*. This work, like Kingsley's classic, attempts to reconcile childhood mortality with the crushing weight of the standard Calvinist doctrines of original sin and the eternal punishment of the damned. The hero of the tale is a young boy with the curious name of Diamond who, at first appearance seems to be a very good and well-behaved boy, indeed. Of course, from the Reformed perspective with which MacDonald continually struggled, general goodness and sanctification are unequal with the latter being the requirement of salvation. So, though it seems highly unlikely in terms of narrative possibility, Diamond, the good little boy, is in all kinds of spiritual and mortal peril from the narrative's outset. What is clear to the reader approaching the text having already read it once is fairly unpredictable to the first time reader of Diamond's tale; that is, MacDonald has meant from the very beginning that Diamond should die. Thus, his task was to show how, for Diamond, death would not be at all a bad thing.

To this end, Diamond experiences a number of encounters with an anthropomorphised, fairy-like figure of the North Wind who comes and blows on his head at night to summon him. The North Wind carries Diamond along with her as she goes about her work, which is easily deduced as that of the harbinger of death, or Death herself, while all the time reforming Diamond through theological object lessons. The first lesson, of course, is that she is not to be feared or reviled even if she appears to do things both fearful and reviling. She instructs Diamond:

If you see me with my face all black, don't be frightened. If you see me flapping wings like a bat's, as big as the whole sky, don't be frightened. If you hear me raging ten times worse than Mrs. Bill, the blacksmith's wife—even if you see me looking in at people's windows like Mrs. Eve Dropper, the gardener's wife—you must believe that I am doing my work. (*Wind* 14)

This work, consequently, is always to be interpreted as both good and necessary for its objects. Diamond observes her take the form of a raging wolf to scare off a nurse who was being abusive to an infant. Diamond then enquires why he should see the North Wind in one form and others see her in another:

“Why should you see things,” returned the North Wind, “that you would not understand or know what to do with? Good people see good things; bad people, bad things.”

“Then you are a bad thing?”

“No. For *you* see me, Diamond, dear,” said the girl, and she looked down at him, and Diamond saw the loving eyes of the great lady beaming from the depths of her falling hair.

“I had to make myself look like a bad thing before she could see me. If I had put on any other shape than a wolf's she would not have seen me, for that is what is growing to be her own shape inside of her.”  
(*Wind* 37)

Within the context of a fairy tale, the North Wind's philosophy makes good sense. Fairy tales are meant to have such strict distinctions between good people and bad and no one ever feels sorry when bad things inevitably happen to the bad characters. Yet remember, for a moment, what MacDonald is addressing here. He is talking about the ferocity of Death and its consequences which he casually dismisses by indicating that good people should have nothing to fear from death. Yet it must be said that the pain of bereavement many times does not signify anything at all, it is just a sad consequence of existence and human interconnectedness. Within the context of the fairy tale the principle works because it comes from the voice of the North Wind—even if it does not seem to make sense the reader is conditioned to recognise that

much of what the North Wind says does not make sense, but only because those she speaks to do not have the capacity to understand. But would this tactic work from a pulpit?

Compare this to poor Mr. Vane who experiences a veritable purgatory as he is forced to die time and time again just to make himself into a person who can appease divine righteousness. He makes his decision against Mr. Raven's advice on numerous occasions, but is somehow always led back to where he started. As a narrative it is able to work if the reader is ready to assume that, as Mr. Raven says, it will all work out for good in the end and Mr. Vane will be immeasurably better for it. Yet when this same sentiment appears in MacDonald outside of his fantasy, it is much more insidious:

A multitude of teaching men have taught their fellows that Jesus came to bear our punishment and save us from hell. They have represented a result as the object of his mission—the said result nowise to be desired by true man save as consequent on the gain of his object. The mission of Jesus was from the same source and with the same object as the punishment of our sins. He came to work along with our punishment. He came to side with it, and set us free from our sins [...] For hell is God's and not the devil's. Hell is on the side of God and man, to free the child of God from the corruption of death. (*Sermons* 8)

MacDonald here expounds a deity as wicked as William Empson could ever have imagined in Milton. For this God punishes his children and calls it grace. He gives them free will only to torture them until they choose what he wants them to choose. This God is, in fact, arguably much worse than the God of eternal damnation. This is not to say, of course, that MacDonald was himself a wicked person who delighted in other people's misery, but simply to show *why* it was so necessary for him to turn to fantasy in order to reconcile his overwhelming compassion for humanity with his ultimate and immovable belief in divine justice. What fantasy accomplishes in this

case is to strip away the reasoning, the particulars, the argument of MacDonald's theology to leave the two powerful themes which characterised his thought and belief: love and righteousness. In his fantasies, set on his own terms, it is not his ability to theologise which is under inspection but the character and composition of his readers.

This subtle sort of manipulation of criticism back towards the reader is just the sort of move that has been seen time after time in both Milton and MacDonald as they draw up their greatest schemes to the Enlightenment and its intellectual vices. Here, by placing this dialogue in the mouth of his most divisive, controversial and crucial character, the North Wind, he attempts to shore up the suspension of disbelief concerning the nature of death, whose anthropomorphised form she is easily seen to be from quite an early stage in the novel.

By showing the reader first her most beautiful form, MacDonald entices him not only towards that suspension but to the adoption of a willing, if temporary, affirmative belief. Should the reader yet object to this characterisation comes MacDonald's response that should his North Wind not strike the reader as he describes her—that is, good, maternal, impartial, etc.—this would reflect more on the reader's character than on the nature of the North Wind (or death). For if the North Wind appears as a wolf, it must be a truly beastly personage who forces her to appear in such a way. Of course, the disciplined reader has more than enough defences against this sort of literary trick or snare, for he can just as easily reply to himself, the text or the author—whichever he imagines himself to actually be dialoguing with—that it is also untrue and illogical to suppose that all appearance is due to the viewer and not the thing itself.

Of course, once the reader reaches this point it could be fairly said that MacDonald has already won. For when the educated, disciplined and reasonable reader finds himself locked in an attempt to overpower and scotch a fairy tale—locked in a room hissing and fuming about a book with fanciful illustrations for every chapter—the illusion of logical superiority has already become exposed and its position deconstructed. In a way, MacDonald’s move to frustrate and expose the obstinacy of his most critical readers is a rhetorical one, or rather the technique of a skilled and experienced dialectician. For it certainly seems that the reader who would not grant the simple claim of a character already admitted as being quite supernatural that she appears according to the nature and needs of others is guilty of not being a good sport in the matter—that is, he has not played his part in establishing a minimum degree of the suspension of disbelief and he cannot claim that the text has not done its own part to support it and maintain it as good fiction should. Instead he has from the onset adopted a combative posture towards the text which makes him look like a shallow and villainous bully and begs the question of why he started in on the text in the first place if not to perpetuate some irrational malice. In this way, though MacDonald’s logic seems to be lesser or at least paradoxical in comparison to that of his imagined opponents, he still emerges victorious in as much as he appeals to a code which still holds just as much if not more sway over the human mind as logic.

This code, or as it could even be deemed, impulse, is one of decency and empathy which sternly if not invariably presides over social relations. Reading becomes such a “social relation” as soon as the reader starts, in one way or another, dialoguing with a text or author (real or imagined) if not even before then. He becomes the politician who, in a debate, wins all the major points but in the process alienates himself from the public (as with the first televised debate between Nixon

and Kennedy in 1960). In the case of the reader, it is not some unseen audience which will judge him and shun his bad behaviour, but rather himself. For in the instant which the reader recognises his rather heated and naughty attitude towards the text or its author, the reader's response criticism becomes true self-criticism, putting him in just the right position to read and benefit from something like MacDonald's work. As for the reader who merely enjoys his malevolent games of deconstruction which is to some extent incapable of "fighting back" in such a violent hermeneutical engagement, it must be said that the ethical urge in *At the Back of the North Wind*, which is a kind of *kenosis* (as it is in many of MacDonald's fictional writings), is entirely unavailable to such an individual to begin with.

What this dialogue really betrays, even more so than MacDonald's consistent and continuing attempts to draw his readers into a position of either belief or self-criticism, is the way in which for him, a hermeneutical position was the beginning of all theological work. The position is the one of Anodos, standing on the cliff, deciding to meet death half-way, the position of Mr. Vane as he finally lies down to do the "work" of dying, the position of being *At the Back of the North Wind*. The nature of this position and its consequences for a fantastic theology will be explored in the chapter to come.

## Chapter 4: Liturgical Hermeneutics and Fantasy Literature

### **MacDonald's Hermeneutics as *Kenotic Liturgia***

The characteristic of MacDonald's prose which in fact links him to Milton was not just its fantastic, imaginative nature but its ability to invoke a participatory reading, its sermonic nature and its tendency to deflect criticism from itself and back onto the reader. This cooperative, creative and participative dynamic to the fiction of George MacDonald is no passing coincidence, but a reflection of his extensive, deliberative and developed view of hermeneutics. The most informative piece on this subject was a short essay titled "The Fantastic Imagination" which first appeared in a collection of his essays known as *A Dish of Orts*. The essay laid out both MacDonald's thinking on what was necessary for a good fairytale as well as his theory for the interpretation of them and their truth value. Much of his thinking falls directly in line with Romantic, specifically Coleridgean, thought on the matter. For instance, he says:

The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they themselves suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms—which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of *Fancy*: in either case, Law has been diligently at work. (*Orts* 206)

The actual extent to which Coleridge influenced MacDonald is unknown, however it is not difficult to imagine how such a statement could be added in a later addendum to

*Biographia Literaria* which covered the advent of fantasy novels for adults. Here the Imagination is more than a creative faculty; it is a moral one.

MacDonald's conception of "Law," roughly equivalent to how one might expect a Romantic to view Nature, was central to his thinking about the value and beauty of Fantasy. "Law," he says, "is the soil in which alone beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed; and you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts her garments to fit her" (*Orts* 207). In this way MacDonald synthesises the thinking of close friend John Ruskin to form a productive framework for his theory of aesthetics in this new and emergent literary genre. In these things, aesthetics and literary theory, MacDonald was very much a man of his times. Yet as he was so keen to do in many areas of his life, MacDonald would go even further in developing this theory than his fellows. He, of course, very much needed to do so as he intended to tread virtually fresh literary sod. Because his work would seek to do more than to preach at his readers, and rather to dialogue and interact with them, he needed to dialogue with his "reader" about this new dialogue in reading, that is, his hermeneutical theory. To this end MacDonald employs a sceptical interlocutor with whom he will round out the essay.

Queries the interlocutor: "You write as if a fairy tale were a thing of importance: must it have meaning?" To which MacDonald responds:

It cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth [...] Everyone, however, who feels the story will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another. (*Orts* 207)

At the onset it seems that MacDonald favours a casual and slightly apathetic form of hermeneutical relativism foreign to the unrestrained passion of his novels. Yet this is not the whole of his thought. The interlocutor follows up on his question adding "If

so, how am I to assure myself that I am not reading my own meaning into it, but yours out of it?" The key to MacDonald's hermeneutics is in the following response:

Why should you be so assured? It may be better that you should read your own meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine. (*Orts* 208)

MacDonald's text, then, is not one starved of meaning but saturated with it. The meaning flowing from it neither excludes nor denies its author's intentions, but simply exceeds them. For MacDonald, writing itself is a kenotic activity in which one gives up the right of possession of his own thoughts expressed in words and makes himself vulnerable to the reader. He is happy to give his writing as a gift so that it may in fact inspire things in others greater than he himself could have envisioned. To put it another way, he allows for the text itself to become its own "other world" beyond the scope of his control. This, according to Bridget Nichols, puts him in league with the wider scheme of Romantic hermeneutics which "based its project of interpretation on the premise that the present reader was able to understand the original author of a text better than he was able to understand himself" (21).

When the interlocutor next exclaims that words are "meant and fitted to carry a precise meaning!" MacDonald is afforded the opportunity to expand his thought on the interplay of words, meaning and intentionality.

It is very seldom indeed that they [words] carry the exact meaning of any user of them! And if they can be so used as to convey definite meaning, it does not follow that they ought never to carry anything else [...] I will go further—The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think for himself. (*Orts* 209)

MacDonald's supreme suspicion of the ability of words to function as intended is visionary for its time. Yet to hold conterminously this suspicion and an ultimate

optimism of words to accomplish even more than conveying meaning is rather unique. The crux of the whole theory is again MacDonald's focus on the reader as subject. It is not the material which he puts down with pen on paper which most interests him, but how it might spring some tangential reaction in his reader.

Of course, the attitude and character of the reader is of supreme importance. MacDonald reverts perhaps to his deterministic Calvinist roots, echoing the voice of the North Wind when he states "If he [the reader] be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best [...] If he be a true man, he will imagine true things; what matter whether I meant them or not?" (*Orts* 210). The statement simply reflects the fact that productive literary encounters occur when both the reader and the author choose to meet together by virtue of prioritising something beyond themselves.<sup>35</sup> This 'something beyond' is the literary encounter itself, found *in*, or *through*, or *at* the text. This is a hermeneutical environment which emphasises the ultimate importance of the act or process of reading over and above even the reader himself. That is, the author privileges the reader with the text and the reader privileges the text (and its author by extension) by recognising rather than exploiting its vulnerability. Only when all parties renounce ownership or control over the text is the text free to be as itself:

What the reader, like every true monastic (as hagiography insists), must learn is to cease to be at all—to become entirely imaginary, utterly decentered, and only then can he or she become a "true" reader. In the act of reading, we must also learn an absolute kenosis, which is alone the guarantee of true incarnation, or enfleshment, and then, in the imagination, consumers and consumed, we can be free to be interpreters of the hidden text. Of course, in the actual text, and necessarily, the author will continue to test and defy us, realizing our unwillingness to let go and our inability to stop asking the wrong questions. Texts remain dangerously seductive to the mind. (Jasper, *Body* 58-59)

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<sup>35</sup> This is something like Gadamer's hermeneutics of friendship. "For Gadamer, hermeneutics means a way to hear and welcome the coming of the other, both in person and living dialogue, and in the great texts and works of art in our tradition" (Caputo 42).

This dynamic is illustrated by the language which MacDonald uses for both the untrue man and the true man. The untrue man is said to “draw” out evil, that is take for himself, while the true man will “imagine” or create true things. Thus in MacDonald’s hermeneutical system the evil, untrue one is exemplified by selfish commandeering while the true man is characterised by a selfless contribution to the work itself.

If, at this point, there would seem to be an uncharacteristically religious dimension to what is normally a very secular conversation (more unreligious than un-theological, certainly), that of hermeneutics, then appearances support the thesis of this chapter: liturgy, in both its corporate and formal aspects, is indispensable to the reading of Fantasy literature after MacDonald. Yet, the fantastic is also crucial in understanding what is happening in liturgy as well. If Fantasy functions as a liturgy, it is also true that liturgy functions as corporate fantasy. Recognising this dual reality is key to developing a richer and more productive hermeneutical approach to each of these but even more instrumental in instructing the reader/worshiper on the art and discipline of living between two “worlds,” which are temporal and eternal, respectively. If the last chapter dwelt with mostly theoretical or doctrinal aspects of theology as mediated by the fantastic, this chapter will focus on a practical aspect of theology.

### **The Death-Cycle**

Liturgy does not exist in the particular but in the corporate. It is, literally, “the work of the people.” For this reason it would be improper and unfounded to speak simply of MacDonald’s work, as singular texts, in terms of a liturgical remembrance and observation. In order for it to be truly liturgical it must have a community to

support it to these ends. The community is constituted in the primary sense between the author and the body of his readers. But it extends also to the communities surrounding other Fantasy texts which likewise remember the Passion through the same formal engagement. The focus in this respect is not on Christ figures in a particular sub-genre, but rather on characters who, by their deaths, remember and perform the Passion type which dominates Fantasy literature after George MacDonald. The unmistakable elements of this form are as follows:

1. The hero is made aware of the need for him to die.
2. The hero undertakes a journey to death, accompanied by a guild or company of friends (the community can be either dead or living).
3. The guild/company gives help to the hero along the way which enables him to complete his journey.
4. At a crucial point, the hero must leave the guild/company behind and face death alone.
5. The hero gives his life (usually in an attempt to save others).
6. The hero return from death, victorious.

Although this form has been stamped across the entire genre, the sad constraints of necessity and practicality insist this study only undertakes a few notable examples. With this in mind it is pertinent, at least, to choose from among them not only those well known and iconic but well situated within the narrative of ideas that this thesis has been laying out. The subjects will be the work of the three most well known and widely read fantasists of the twentieth century (and likely of all time), J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling. Among these it is appropriate to begin with Lewis who, of them all, most consciously drew his inspiration and his project from George MacDonald.

### Lewis and Eleusis

Lewis's *adoration* (in that word's most ecclesial sense) of MacDonald has been so widely expounded that it hardly needs further explanation here, but it does need to be noted if only to cement the transmission of MacDonald's types to Lewis's work. Of course it was the work of MacDonald which Lewis said in his spiritual biography *Surprised by Joy* (1955) which "baptised" his imagination.<sup>36</sup> MacDonald even shows up in Lewis's death-Fantasy *The Great Divorce* (1945)—which is fairly and predominantly read as autobiographical—as the protagonist's spiritual guide out of purgatory onto the threshold of heaven. Within his writing the spirit of MacDonald clearly asserts itself in themes of death, joy, reality and truth all throughout the canon of Lewis's fantastical works.

Of course the most obvious example that offers itself is the story of the death and subsequent resurrection of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Yet this is the very example which must be done away with most quickly in order to retain the heart of the matter. For while it displays all of the characteristics of MacDonald's Fantasy death-cycle, it does so not as a remembrance or celebration of the original Christological form, but as a recreation of it. It is because Aslan represents not a type of Christ but an attempt at translating Christ himself into "another world" that makes his character most problematic. Instead of maintaining the fluidity, multiplicity and contingency that characterised true the fantasy of Milton and MacDonald, Lewis succumbs to the temptation of the totalising allegory. It is at the conclusion of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952) where the transcendence of

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<sup>36</sup> For an explanation of this relationship, see the introduction to Kerry Dearborn's [Baptized Imagination](#).

Aslan's character is made explicit. Of his own world, our world, Edmund queries Aslan, "Are you there too?" to which the lion responds "I am. But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name" (Lewis, *Narnia* 541). In this one must be reminded that while the trope may appear overworked and kitsch to an adult, the allegory is fresh and full of wonder to children when first learning the mechanism of symbolism. It is for these minds which Lewis undoubtedly wrote his Narnia tales and for those who had lost the wonder of myth altogether.

Indeed, there have been untold amounts of sharp criticism levelled at Aslan, including a quip that the character was "full of dark, neofascist implications" which might be a small amount overstated for a creature who likes being cuddled and who sometimes causes flowers to spring up beneath his very feet (Jasper, *Body* 44). In truth the character should probably not be blamed for being stretched as a metaphor further than was ever tenable so that he could be so easily read in nefarious ways. Some heed should be given to David Brown's statement that "If words contribute to religious beliefs most effectively when they are nearest the visual, that is, in metaphor and analogies, then inevitably their impact will be distorted unless the rules appropriate to such forms of language are properly appreciated" (132). Therefore, Aslan is still just a metaphor which clings to the imagery of other, more particular, biblical metaphors and should be read in light of this reality—lest his character should simply burst under the weight of expectation placed on him by virtue of his representation of the irreducible Word. If Lewis has failed here he has done no more or less than any other theologian or artist who takes on the task of speaking about the divine. He has inscribed, but not circumscribed.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This phrase comes from the tradition of iconography, specifically St. Nicephorus, linked to metaphor in Brown as cited earlier (Mondzain 216; Jasper, *Body* 22).

So then, without indicating that Aslan is irredeemable/inexcusable or that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* should somehow be done away with, it will be better to consider other examples of Lewis's embodiment of the death-cycle which are not so entrenched in problematic symbols and controversy. Instead, it will be fruitful to look to the most widely acclaimed of Lewis's literature for adults, the epic retelling of the *Eros and Psyche* myth called *Till We Have Faces* (1956). Much of the effort to revive the old tale centred on Lewis's belief in the centrality of and commonality of all human myth.<sup>38</sup> Therefore he undertakes a redemptive project on behalf of not only the *Eros and Psyche* myth, but of all myths.

One of the central figures in the re-telling is Ungit, the ancient, primordial goddess of the Kingdom of Glome who is at once all-mother and all-consumer as well as the lover of the God of the Mountain (who takes Eros's place in this retelling). The character, if she can be called that for indeed in the tale she appears as much as *myth itself* as a figure in a myth, is a vastly complex one and the interaction of the protagonist, Orual (or Maia as she is called in Greek by those close to her), is similarly complex. For most of her life Orual resents Ungit and her backward priest. She, being herself admittedly hideously formed and a stranger to intimacy, hated even more the deep carnality of the fertility rituals of the cult and the "temple girls" (who are undoubtedly temple prostitutes, although Lewis might have been embarrassed to say as much). From a young age she is taught by her Greek slave tutor, called the Fox, to deconstruct Ungit as "lies of poets" (*Faces* 8).

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<sup>38</sup> Incidentally, this belief in the universality and fluidity of all human myth is why Lewis was not particularly worried by the obviousness of his metaphor in Aslan—the whole point was to show how a type or an image could bleed over into another world. What makes it problematic is that while it is an interesting and productive theory of myth, in this case it works out poorly as literature.

Yet, immediately before Orual (in her middle and later years “Queen of Glome”) undertakes the death-journey which will be the object of this investigation, she attends the annual festival at which the high priest of Ungit must be “born” from her temple. She describes again the chaotic, tense, sweaty ritual that she has remarked on so many times before and which even the reader by this point knows all too well. What strikes her at this last viewing is the pure “joy of the people” inspired by this rite (273). What troubles the wise, hardened queen at the end of all of these years of turning a stone-face to the House of Ungit, with all of the venom of deep personal hurt and traumatic experience on the honed steel of Fox’s philosophy, is that she realises that Ungit bears a reality insofar as she *works* for those who believe her. Orual recounts observing and then questioning a peasant woman who, during the festival, came before the vast, shapeless, blood and smoke caked stone that was the image of Ungit and fell on her knees weeping in its presence. Moments later the woman got up, her crying soothed, and was leaving the temple when the Queen spoke to her:

“Has Ungit comforted you, child?” I asked.  
 “Oh yes, Queen,” said the woman, her face almost brightening, “Oh yes. Ungit has given me great comfort. There’s no goddess like Ungit.” (272)

This is the catalyst of destabilisation which makes the journey to come possible. Orual returns to the temple and “[sinks] into deep thought” (273). While she is in this state her father, the long dead spectre of fear and repression in her life, appears before her and bid her to follow him. Strangely, there is no philosophy in her at that moment to protest that ghosts are such things as “lies of poets,” and she complies, every bit as fearful as she had been in her terrible life as an abused teenager. “How could I ever have thought I should escape from the King?” she laments. He instructs her to aid him in digging a hole in the throne room and, after the removal of several flagstones,

there appears a deep hole which the King bids her fling herself into. There was no resisting, and the King pulled Orual down into the abyss with him. They land in a cavern and repeat the digging ritual several times, each time removing Orual further and further from her grasp on reality. Her father taunts her, “There’s no Fox to help you here,” for he had always interceded before the King on her behalf and the King both resented and coveted his command of *logos*, “we’re far below any dens that foxes can dig,” he says (275).

When at last the final dregs of her will to resist the impossible thing which was happening to her, when its grotesqueness became at last mundane, then the King assaulted her, over and again, with this question: “Who is Ungit?” At first she would not respond, but neither would the King relent. Again came the question, “Who is Ungit?” and at last her broken soul wailed out in the cavernous abyss “I am Ungit” (276). At this point Orual finds herself back in her bedchamber. So full of despair was she at this revelation of unanimity with that very thing which she hated so supremely, the very essence of earth and flesh, that she despised her life and made to run herself through with her old sword, but was by this time so racked with the frailty of her later years that she was unable even to hold it. The next day she resolves to destroy herself again and makes her way to the river to drown herself from which she hears a mighty voice cry out from across the river: “Do not do it.”

Instantly—I had been freezing cold till now—a wave of fire passed over me, even down to my numb feet. It was the voice of a god [...] It may well be that by trickery of priests men have sometimes taken a mortal’s voice for a god’s. But it will not work the other way. No one who hears a god’s voice takes it for a mortal’s.

“Lord, who are you?<sup>39</sup>” said I.

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<sup>39</sup> A true “road to Damascus” experience grips Orual here, the language being used to signify the enormity of this revelation and its significance to the conclusion of Orual’s tale. Perspectives, it foreshadows, will be changed utterly and history, indeed the humanity of the Queen herself will be “baptised”.

“Do not do it,” said the god. “You cannot escape Ungit by going to the deadlands, for she is there also. Die before you die. There is no chance after.”  
 “Lord, I am Ungit.”  
 But there was no answer. (279)

The impetus given to Orual *remembers* and *celebrates*<sup>40</sup> the one given to Mr. Vane by Mr. Raven, that he must sleep before he can work, die before he can live.

The hinted sacramentality of Orual’s remark “Then the gods left me for some days to chew the strange bread they had given me” is no mistake. For before Orual’s tale is complete (τέλος) she will face utter silence in the face of the Total Presence of the Eucharistic moment in which the only speech which remains is that of the declarative Word. Whether or not this somewhat numinous culmination moves one’s imagination to the sacral feast or not is obviously a vastly subjective matter, but not so for one who engages the text in such a manner as described by Jasper’s “third way” approach to reading (in opposition to literalist totalisation and depreciative demythologisation): “But there is another way of reading [...] that is, to dive into the stories and the text, to embrace them and instantiate them in yourself; that is [...] to ‘read religiously’ ” (*Body* 144). In this manner the reader is overwhelmed by the sacramentality of the entire myth, from the yearly birthing in the House of Ungit to the blood sacrifices that stained her face to the giving of Psyche to the Shadowbrute/God of the Mountain to be at once devoured and courted. Were this not enough to cause the mind to think in terms of the liturgical, one is pointed even more explicitly in that direction:

I knew that were certain initiations, far away at Eleusis in the Greeklands, where by a man was said to die and live again before the soul left the body. But how could I go there? Then I remembered that conversation which his friends had with Socrates before he drank the

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<sup>40</sup> “Remember” of course in its sense of ἀναμνήσις and “celebrate” in its Latin sense of *celebrare*.

hemlock, and how he said true wisdom was the skill and practice of death. (281)

While, of course, the Eleusian mysteries remain by and large mysterious, it is not in fact difficult to suppose why they are included here and undoubtedly conflated with Christian baptism. The idea that Eleusian initiation constituted a “death before dying” comes down from antiquity only from a fragmental quotation of Plutarch in Stobaeus:

Thus death and initiation closely correspond; even the words (*teleutan* and *teleisthai*) correspond, and so do the things. At first there are wanderings, and toilsome running about in circles and journeys through the dark over uncertain roads and *culs de sac*; then, just before the end, there are all kinds of terrors, with shivering, trembling, sweating, and utter amazement. After this, a strange and wonderful light meets the wanderer; he is admitted into clean and verdant meadows, where he discerns gentle voices, and choric dances, and the majesty of holy sounds and sacred visions. Here the now fully initiated is free, and walks at liberty like a crowned and dedicated victim, joining in the revelry; he is the companion of pure and holy men, and looks down upon the uninitiated and unpurified crowd here below in the mud and fog, trampling itself down and crowded together, though of death remaining still sunk in its evils, unable to believe in the blessings that lie beyond. (qtd. in Grant 148)

From what is known or easily deduced of the Eleusian cult, it was deeply steeped in the imagery of death and new life that typified the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their relationship to Hades—and indeed, it is of course Demeter and Persephone to which the Eleusian cult was dedicated. The religion of Demeter and Persephone was, like Ungit, very carnal, very fleshly and still ultimately sacramental (and thus also *μυστήριον*).

Cicero remarks at the higher purpose of the rites, “as the rites are called ‘initiations,’ so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope” (*De legibus* 2.14, 36). The emphasis, which Plutarch wrongly interprets as a hyper-Platonism, is actually the exact opposite. It is the immanence of divinely renewed life

as it is posed by the Demeter and Persephone legend where, because she ate the pomegranate seeds of Hades, Persephone must forsake the earth every year and live in death one month for every one of the six seeds she ate. Yet while this “fatal flaw” annually draws her down towards Death, it is not the final word: every year the reunion of Demeter and Persephone was celebrated with the Eleusian mysteries. In conjunction with this, Hippolytus states that the greatest μυστήριον of the Eleusian Cult was actually the presentation in silence of a reaped ear of corn (5.8.39-40). The mystery, ostensibly, is the cycle of the seed in its death and regeneration.

The ancient Mediterranean world used underground silos to store corn after the harvest. In fact, there is even an inscription bearing an order for one such silo to be built at Eleusis to hold the corn offerings brought to Demeter there (Nilsson 58). Interestingly, there is an annual festival in Sicily which celebrates the harvest and is known as the Descent of Kore<sup>41</sup> (Persephone) where the harvest is taken underground for storage. In the planting season the corn is brought back up in what is called, quite significantly for this study, ἄνοδος. Whether George MacDonald named his character in the sense of “wayless one” or “the ascending one” is ultimately indeterminable. Yet it is entirely possible that it could have been intended in both ways, each at different moments in the narrative. What is certain, however, is that such a detail would not have slipped past the notice of the ever attentive and the Classically well-versed Lewis. But here one strikes to the heart of the character of Hades as he appears in ancient myth. He is, at once, the god of death and the underworld to whom the dead are committed and also Πλούτων, the wealth giver, who releases Persephone (and her corn) to the surface to provide for life again.

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<sup>41</sup> “*Katagoge Kores*”

In their originality, the Eleusian mysteries probably connoted what Nilsson calls “the immortality of generations,” or the idea that life continues on always through one’s own seed (σπέρμος). Yet this was not consolation enough for later generations who sought immortality for themselves, and indeed the cult began to interpret itself this way. In these days the purpose of the mysteries was nothing less than “to elevate man above the human sphere into the divine and to assure his redemption by making him a god and so conferring immortality upon him” (68, 52). Indeed, the later Athenians planted corn on the graves of the dead and called them *δημητρείοι* (65). Cosmoupolos notes in his recent study of the cult that the fact that Tertullian names the mystery as a phallus is not in fact problematic and refutes the arguments that Hippolytus confused the Eleusian cult with the Phrygian cult (36-37). It is not difficult to imagine that the former could be used as (a symbol of) the latter—an ear of corn *could be* a phallus. The seeming digression in tone here actually returns us to the primary subject at hand, which is Orual in all of her seething, vulgar, earthy and lewd splendour.

By referencing the Eleusian cult initiations, not only is Lewis making a wider appeal to a Christian archetype of baptism, but he is actually introducing the liturgy of his subjects. In this moment, Orual reinterprets her role within the myth and realises she is not one of Psyche’s jealous sisters, for they meet their demise immediately after their treachery soils the marriage bed of their sister and her divine lover. Yet, even after this event, Orual must live on plagued by her actions and their consequences. In Lewis’s tale the jealousy Psyche’s sister has is born out of a very shallow and twisted form of loving that wishes to possess. When the introduction of the God of the Mountain as Psyche’s devourer/lover challenges this vision of the love Orual has for Psyche, it begins to deconstruct both itself and her. Orual reminisced later, “A love

like that can grow to be nine-tenths hatred and still call itself love” (266). So she grows from the jealous sister into the spiteful Aphrodite, who is also Ungit.<sup>42</sup> It is this realisation that ruins her, she has reinserted herself into the myth and its liturgy as a villain rather than a tragic victim. For it is Aphrodite who, in her wrath, sends Psyche to Death in order to make her (Aphrodite) beautiful again. Orual is Ungit, by her own admission, and yet it is Ungit who is the very centre of her complaint which she is forced to read, horrified at her own voice, before the gods.

The response to Orual’s utterance is a pure, unrelenting silence. Then the judge at last speaks and says “Are you answered?” Orual’s pathetic and yet perfect reply is simply, “Yes.” In her memoir at this point she laments of the total negation of language she experienced before the *divine host*:

Lightly men talk of saying what they mean. Often when he was teaching me to write in Greek the Fox would say, “Child, to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that’s the whole art and joy of words.” A glib saying. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you’ll not talk about the joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? (294)

It was only after the removal of everything she thought that she was and of everything she thought the gods were that Orual was able to both see herself for who she really was and to speak before the gods, no matter how truly vile her countenance and poisoned or foolish her words. The scene is strikingly reminiscent of Marion’s statement “And hence the Word, the Said, finally says nothing; he lets people speak, he lets people talk, ‘Jesus gave him no answer’ (John 19:19 = Luke 23:9). And so he

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<sup>42</sup> Since the Fox reformed Glome’s temple, a Greek image of Aphrodite stood next to Ungit as an alternative it more primal alternative, but wasn’t favored by the commoners (272).

does by letting be said, and so he says by letting be done” (140). Similarly, it is only at this moment of negation that Orual is prepared to witness/participate in the sacred liturgy which is Psyche’s journey to Death and back again. It is in the antechamber of the divine courtroom in which she is to be judged that Orual witnesses the living mural of Psyche and Orual, living as each other, journeying ever closer, as one, to Death and to their judgment.

Orual remarks and wonders at the living paradox of the two of them, separate and yet somehow sharing the same journey, the same life, the same being. “Is it possible?” she asks the Fox, the second of her ghostly guides after her father. “That was one of the true things I used to say to you. Don’t you remember? We’re all limbs of one Whole. Hence, of each other. Men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle” he replied (300-301). The last chapter in the liturgy sees Psyche to the Deadlands (even as Orual has already herself gone) to gather the remedy that will make Ungit and all things beautiful again. Then, just as Psyche has completed the final task, the pageant being played out before Orual becomes actual and Psyche returns to Orual and presents her with the casket to make her beautiful. Yet their reunion is cut short by the God of the Mountain, who is also Eros and so much more at this point in the text that it almost bursts with the volume of meaning, referentiality and sacrality. “I was being unmade,” Orual remembers. “I was no one” (307). She stood hand in hand with Psyche and happened, just before the God entered, to catch their reflection in a pool. There were two Psyches. No sooner had she seen this than the God appeared and declared the otherwise ineffable, “You also are Psyche,” and the vision ended and Orual was back in her chamber (308). It would seem that Orual’s death was in fact the figurative and fantastic liturgical “death before dying” after all.

The necessity of this process for Orual is twofold: firstly it provided her with the revelation that she existed as part of a beautiful Whole and secondly, by virtue of that truth, changed, transformed and even redeemed her very being. With this transformation accomplished, Orual was at last able to die in fact which is exactly what she did several days after her vision while compiling her memoir.

Lewis's myth presents its reader with celebration in total of the liturgical death-cycle of MacDonald. He takes the reader into the heart of not the Eleusian, but the Christian μυστήριον. There is silence there also, as there was silence in the Eleusian rite, but not the revelation of an object as mystery, although the carnal sacrality of Orual's *body* is ever central as a *being-towards-death*, but a declarative Word: "You also are Psyche." In this mystery the initiate is unmade and remade and also united with the redemptive whole just as in the work of Paul: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Co. 12:27). That this declaration is one rightly and necessarily embedded in myth and, indeed, *fantasy* is a revelation Lewis derived from reading MacDonald and talking (generally about this experience) with Tolkien (Duriez 57). It was a changing experience because it was, in fact, a liturgical experience and this is what Lewis and MacDonald both intended to accomplish in their fantasy.

It is fitting, then, to turn consequently to that great friend of Lewis's, J.R.R. Tolkien. The turn is not in the same sort of doting, adolescent infatuation that has been loaded onto the pair by generations, now, of hero-seeking religious enthusiasts and devotees to Fantasy literature alike. No, it is instead because of their unique position as both well respected mythographic scholars and theological aspirants who inherit a sort of modified Romantic myth-structure through the irreplaceable George MacDonald. So then, it is not the fact that they were friends for which they are paired

here, as if in some daytime television drama, but because of the commonalities that made them friends in the first place. This, then—although it has an obvious human or relational element to it—is primarily a literary conjunction.

### **Tolkien and the Greatest of Fairy Stories**

Fantasy, and all things Faërie, were things of no little importance for Tolkien.<sup>43</sup> He famously interpreted the act of Fantasy to be nothing less than “sub-creation” and it is this particular slant on his fantasy writing that must direct the scope of attention towards it. Because Tolkien wrote as sub-creator, he felt no need to re-create subjects already attended to by God. This is perhaps the seed of his deepest dislike of anything approaching allegory, though many have fruitlessly attempted to read him in these terms. This is perhaps what sets Tolkien apart from Lewis (and even MacDonald) more than anything else: rules.

Tolkien thought that beauty was derived from order and that the joy of Faërie was to create entire new worlds with entire new orders. By his exacting standards the suspension of disbelief was “a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending” and that his adult readers, “if they really liked it, for itself, they would not have to suspend disbelief: they would believe—in this sense” (*Tree* 36-37). Now, whether or not this is true, whether or not it could possibly work this way, this is the thought which governed Tolkien’s creative process. So while it would be impossible for Tolkien to insert a liturgy—Christian, Greek or otherwise—or any other such worldly thing like Father Christmas, for which he so unremorsefully attacked Lewis, he would enthusiastically compose his tales based on what he deemed the moral or spiritual types and orders of the “Primary World” (Duriez 131).

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<sup>43</sup> Essentially the art of making fairy stories in Tolkien. “But in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator” (*Tree* 23).

Furthermore, while certainly not the preacher that either Lewis or MacDonald tend to be in their texts, he was not adverse to writing with a purpose or a function. “The magic of Faërie,” he writes, “is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires” (*Tree* 13).

Indeed, this is the function of Fantasy which has scared so many literary Puritans across the years—that it could range anywhere from the simply vapid to the absolutely carnal and perverse. Indeed, this was a problem which Tolkien was aware of: “Fantasy thus, too often, remains undeveloped; it is and has been used frivolously, or even half-seriously, or merely for decoration: it remains merely ‘fanciful’ ” (*Tree* 49). Yet at the same time, when Tolkien states that Fantasy can satisfy “primordial human desires” he refers to those urges that run so much deeper than whatever adolescent desires towards indulgence may exist more recognisably at the surface. These range anywhere from desire to, in turn, create like one’s Creator,<sup>44</sup> to wonder, to experience true joy and to, at last, *escape*. Tolkien writes, “And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this—which might be called the genuine *escapist*, or (I would say) *fugitive* spirit” (68). It is at this point which Tolkien notes his reading (and no doubt inspiration) of George MacDonald<sup>45</sup> and in specific his treatment of death noting that it was not an escape or constant running from death which allowed it to be overcome, but only proper submission to it.

For Tolkien, the highest form of fairy-story was the one which best delivered the happy ending, or, as he deemed it, a *eucatastrophe*:

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<sup>44</sup> “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (*Tree* 56).

<sup>45</sup> “Death is the theme which most inspired George MacDonald” (*Tree* 68).

The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist’, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale—or the otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. (*Tree* 69)

This is where Tolkien most submits to the true nature of fantasy—that which affirms the impossible—for in order for a *eucatastrophe* to be the “sudden, miraculous grace” he describes it as, it must tear at the fabric of any reality with which the human can identify which says that there is nothing beyond, no solace after death, no hope of redeemed sorrows, nothing. This is indeed quite the “sudden turn” in the man who was so obsessed with creating reasonable, believable worlds full of the “inner consistency of reality” which, for him, made good art from fantasy.

Yet what this affirmation truly reflects is a belief that ran deeper in Tolkien than any of his literary or aesthetic opinions. It was, in truth, submission to that which he took to be the ultimate, archetypal story which governed and judged all other stories:

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: ‘mythical’ in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe [...] There is no tale ever told which men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. (*Tree* 72)

Thus, even Tolkien who cannot permit or suffer in any fashion the “mixing” of worlds must admit at least one type into his mythology, the type first established in fantasy by MacDonald, the liturgical death-cycle remembered and reaffirmed by all those who count it the greatest of all possible narrative formulae. “The Evangelium,” Tolkien declares, “has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the

‘happy ending’ ” (73). It is this cataclysmic happy ending which is the object of Tolkien’s pursuit when Tolkien utilises the death cycle. Whereas it occurs again and again throughout his epic saga *The Lord of the Rings*, each time the sort of *grace* or *salvation* it offers is yet more extraordinary.

Three examples of the death-cycle provide themselves especially from the *Rings* saga, those of Gandalf the Wizard, Aragorn the Ranger, later King of Gondor, and Frodo Baggins of the Shire, the one who bore the Ring of Power to the depths of Mount Doom. Now, even to see this odd assemblage of names, titles and deeds strewn across a paragraph as such might bid one to scoff at the sort of *faux* grandeur of it all. One must put aside scepticism long enough to recognise what it is that causes these displays; Tolkien’s myths are not a laughing matter, but powerful literary structures which, if allowed, can call to some of the very depths of human emotion. This is indeed why they are like a hallucinogen for a culture which perceives the calling and significance of the myth but does not know, precisely, how to synthesise it.

So it is that be-cloaked and with Elfish dictionary in one hand and replica Sword of Isildur letter-opener in the other that we turn to the first character under study, Gandalf the Grey, as he and his company face a time of dire crisis trapped underground in the formerly Dwarven realm of Moria which has been, by this time, apparently overrun with orcs and any number of other evil creatures. The company are being hotly pursued by a host of these creatures and a sense of dread is palpable and even the very war drums of the enemy sound out “*Doom, doom*” (*Fellowship* 421). Gandalf, clever wizard that he is, is able to discern their position within the massive complex, however, and commands the others to flee and “choose paths leading right and downwards” while he stays to try and hold a door against the entire

hostile assemblage (424). Ironically, it seems that the only way out is to travel further into the depths, on into the shadowy depths and cavernous abyss.

So the company flies ever downward while Gandalf holds the door, sealing off their escape and succeeds for sometime until a mysterious enemy enters who is well Gandalf's match:

Then something came into the chamber—I felt it through the door, and the orcs themselves were afraid and fell silent. It laid hold of the iron ring, and then it perceived me and my spell. What it was I cannot guess, but I have never felt such a challenge. The counter-spell was terrible, it nearly broke me [...] The door burst in pieces. Something dark as a cloud was blocking all the light inside, and I was thrown backwards down the stairs. (426)

The whole company perceived even more that the possibility of their escape was a slight one. What was more, fear embedded itself in their minds and hearts as they raced ever downwards through the twisting halls and spiralling staircases as though they were in fact in some terrible dream and not, in fact, reality.

At last they came to a long and narrow bridge spanning a dark and seemingly bottomless cavern. They charge across, but not quickly enough, as their faceless enemy at last appears behind them:

What it was could not be seen: it was like a great shadow [...] power and terror seemed to go before it [...] The flames roared up to greet it, and wreathed about it; and a black smoke swirled in the air. Its streaming mane kindled, and blazed behind it. In its right hand was a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire; in its left it held a whip of many thongs.  
“Ai! ai!” wailed Legolas. “A Balrog! A Balrog is come!” (429)

To this striking and horrible revelation, the reader is surely due to respond as well,

“Oh no! A Balrog!” and then, several tense seconds later, “What is a Balrog?”

Briefly stated, a Balrog is demon of ferocious might and composition. When one

plumbs the depths of the Tolkien legendarium, however, he finds a deep and

significant history to this brood. They were originally Maiar, or “lesser powers,” who

were drawn to the rebellious Melkor (of the Valar, or “greater powers”) after his corruption near the beginning of the world. *The Silmarillion* states “Dreadful among these spirits were the Valaruakar, the scourges of fire that in Middle-earth were called Balrogs, demons of terror” (23).

Of course it is not merely for the sake of trivia that the history of Balrogs is mentioned here, but to establish, in part, their close association with death itself. For to meet a Balrog was to meet one’s end—they were powers above what even heroic might could overcome. In the entire expansive history of Tolkien’s world, there exist only two other encounters wherein a Balrog meets its end. In both cases the battle results in mutual demise. The first is the account is a duel between Ecthelion of the Fountain, a “High Elf,” and Gothmog Lord of the Balrogs wherein “each slew the other.” The second is between another elf, named Glorfindel, and an anonymous Balrog wherein “both fell to ruin in the abyss” (*Silmarillion* 292-293). Balrogs, in the myth and history of Tolkien’s world, were synonymous with death itself.

Against such an enemy Gandalf now turned himself, lamenting “What an evil fortune! And I am already weary” (*Fellowship* 429). Gandalf had been journeying towards this point from some time, but is just at this moment made aware of the necessity of his death. He isolated himself, sending the others across the bridge while he remains to confront the demon himself:

“You cannot pass,” he said. The orcs stood still and a dead silence fell. “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.” (430)

Then Gandalf did battle with the Balrog and smote the bridge between himself and the others so that, should he fall, no enemy could pursue them. He cast the Balrog down into the darkness in a spiritual triumph, but as the demon fell it cast its whip which grabbed Gandalf around his legs. “He staggered and fell, grasped vainly a the

stone, and slid into the abyss. ‘Fly, you fools!’ he cried, and was gone” (431). The wizard knew, of course, that victory over a Balrog could not come without death. Indeed, that is the price he pays for the escape of his friends who, moments later, emerge from the nightmarish abyss and mourn for the loss of their companion and saviour. The dream was over, but the sorrow and absence were real.

Strangely enough, Gandalf was actually, in the mythology, cousin or brother to the Balrog with which he did battle. For the wizards, called *Istari*, were of the same stuff as Balrogs, but constituted different choices and destinies. Whereas the Balrogs were Mairon who had fled paradise to join Melkor (and Sauron was chief among them), the *Istari* were those Mairon sent by the other, good Valar to aid the men, elves and dwarves of Middle Earth in opposing the forces of evil. Tolkien writes of him in a letter to the Jesuit Robert Murray in November of 1954:

There are naturally no precise modern terms for what he [Gandalf] was. I wd. venture to say that he was an *incarnate* “angel”—strictly, an ἄγγελος: that is, with the other *Istari*, wizards, ‘those who know’, an emissary from the Lords of the West, sent to Middle-earth, as the great crisis of Sauron loomed on the horizon. (*Letters* 202)

Yet even saying so much of what, for him, these wizards function as must have been tremendously difficult. He was stuck, so to speak, between a type and a hard place. The type was the divine myth with which he invested so much meaning and purpose and the “hard place” was his conviction against all things trite and allegorical. “I have purposely kept all allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only to the most attentive, or kept them in unexplained symbolic forms” (*Letters* 201).

Tolkien could not, though, disguise the death cycle. It was the trope used time and again to accomplish his “eucatastrophes,” or moments of unexpected and inexplicable grace. Among them, it is perhaps that of Gandalf that plays most

significantly, for it is afterwards possible to say “The great storm is coming, but the tide has turned” (645). Speaking of the significance of Gandalf’s death at the hands of the Balrog, Tolkien writes:

Gandalf alone [of the Istari] passes the tests, on a moral plane anyway (he makes mistakes in judgment). For in his condition it was for him a *sacrifice* to perish on the Bridge in defence of his companions, less perhaps than for a mortal Man or hobbit, since he had a far greater inner power than they; but also more, since it was a humbling abnegation of himself in conformity to “the Rules”: for all he could know at that moment he was the *only* person who could direct the resistance to Sauron successfully, and all *his* mission was in vain. (*Letters* 202)

Therefore it is *because* of his death and its precise manner in remembrance of that great type which allowed him to be used by Tolkien’s God, Eru Ilúvatar (The One, the Father of All) to “send” him back to complete his mission. This is precisely the *eucatastrophic* moment in this particular death-cycle, for “He was sent by a mere prudent plan of the angelic Valar or governors, but Authority had taken up this plan and enlarged it, at the moment of its failure” (203).

Liturgically speaking, it was necessary for Gandalf to undergo this sort of hermeneutical kenosis in which he abandoned any claims over “the plan” (or indeed, as it may rightly be called, ὁ λόγος) and his role within it in order for him to catch any glimpse of what the actual Plan was at all. This is likely the sort of thing that David Jasper is getting at when he speaks in purely theological/hermeneutical terms:

[R]eading, and therefore, the reader must deliberately divest him or herself of all possible claims over the text, especially and above all the scriptural text resisting every possible textual seduction of beauty or meaning, in order to enter into the text itself and thereby overcome it, and be overcome by it in an utter defeat that is the only possible means of victory. (*Body* 19)

It is precisely this “meaning” and “beauty” which Gandalf abandons on the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm. He must no longer see his life with meaning, he must relinquish his

cherished role as interpreter of his own fate and experiences and at last fill himself with despair in order that he might have any hope. In this moment, Gandalf leaves “reality” altogether. It is also a moment of death and a moment of pure sacramental, eucatastrophic grace. For only in this way can he banish the Balrog, a brother-spirit evocative of the language of the primal struggle of Beowulf, to which Tolkien devoted so much of his academic study. “We fought far under the living earth, where time is not counted. Ever he clutched me, and ever I hewed him” (*Towers* 654). Gandalf relates to his companions after they are at long last reunited. At length, Gandalf also tells of how he at last overcame the demon:

I threw down my enemy, and he fell from the high place and broke the mountain-side where he smote it in his ruin. Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell. Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done. (655)

The task, it appears, is to give aid in the form of hope and direction to those mortals left in that world who strove to resist the ever increasing power of evil under Sauron. Indeed, at the point where he meets three of his companions in the depths of despair and in a deep forest, both literal and figurative, of not knowing what course they should pursue or if there is even any point in pursuing altogether. “Beyond all hope you return to us in our need!” Aragorn exclaims (645).

More to the point is not the fact that he comes back with significantly enhanced powers to kill villains but with a renewed understanding—although, importantly, not a complete one—of the plan to rescue the world from evil. Again, by giving up his claims over destiny and *meaning* in the world, Gandalf allows himself to be filled in return with this Word, this Purpose which, to the extent which it is able to be uttered in the world, drives the characters forward towards a more complete grace and gives them hope.

Part of this “purpose” comes in the form of a message he delivers to Aragorn from the Elf Queen, Galadriel, which will define and spur on the next of the death-cycles in the *Rings* saga: “*But dark is the path appointed for thee: The Dead watch the road that leads to the Sea*” (*Towers* 656). While this word is delivered to Aragorn in the middle of Tolkien’s third book, it is not until some time later, at the beginning of the fifth book, that any action concerning the word takes place. Thus the foreboding sink into the heart of Aragorn as he goes on, constantly searching and wondering about the words and what they will in fact mean for him. At last the time comes that he raises an army to relieve the imperilled Gondorian city of Minas Tirith, of which he is rightful heir and king, although secretly, but the muster goes slowly and the need for quick support becomes clear lest the city fall and a wide swath of the continent become open to Sauron’s marauding hordes. Aragorn perceives this need but is caught in indecision, sensing all the time that darkness awaits him—“it is dark before me, I must go down also to Minas Tirith, but I do not yet see the road. An hour long prepared approaches” (*Return* 773).

In this moment of dilemma, a company of his kinsmen fortuitously arrive from the North and bring tidings from one of their elders, “The days are short. If thou art in haste, remember the Paths of the Dead” (*Return* 775). This proclamation reminds Aragorn of the words he had received earlier from Gandalf and it becomes clear to him that this is indeed the path he is destined to and must take. For the Paths of the Dead are the haunt of undead souls of a kingdom of marauders who broke an oath of fealty to a king of men in days long before and now remain in the hollows of their ravine, cursed to remain there until they can fulfil their debt. The place is shrouded in fear and mystery, no living person had ever emerged from there, the very place was Death. But Aragorn was the one living heir of the king to whom the wraiths were

bound and the way was in fact the most direct between him and Gondor in need, so he resolved to take the Paths of the Dead despite the fact that it was certain death for him and any who followed. A confidant objects, “But this is madness,” to which Aragorn simply replies, “It is not madness, lady [...] for I go on a path appointed.”

So Aragorn leaves in isolation along with only a few companions and embarks on the way to the Dead. At its gate one of the companions remarks “This is an evil door [...] and my death lies beyond it. I will dare to pass it nonetheless” (*Return* 786). All those that entered the gate surrendered their lives. Yet, because of this self-emptying, this submission of self to *word*, Aragorn is able to exercise his authority. As the dead approach, he summons them to keep their oath and fulfil the duty owed to his family. Silently the Dead fall into line and follow Aragorn as he leads them through the country side, to the horror of all onlookers who cry out “The King of the Dead is come upon us!” to the Battle of Minas Tirith where his ghostly legion turn the tide of battle and eventually save the city and, presumably, the race of men altogether (789).

Admittedly, there is less significance placed on this tale of Aragorn who does not, in fact, suffer any physical death. However it has been a deeper thing altogether which has been under consideration with the death-cycle especially as it functions liturgically and this definitely comes into play in the Paths of the Dead episode. For not only does Aragorn submit himself to a will beyond his own, spoken in the word of prophecy, but relinquishes himself to Death (that he does not literally die is inconsequential in terms of the faith displayed and sacrifice made, as in the episode of Abraham and Isaac) and is baptised into greater spiritual maturity.

Aragorn, throughout the saga, is ever diminishing his identity as a king and Isildur’s heir, preferring much more the wild freedom of his life as a Ranger and the

more quiet responsibility it bore. He feared that to be Isildur's heir would be to inherit Isildur's inherent flaws and failings as he succumbed long ago to the tempting allure of the Ring of Power and was destroyed by it. So, for him, the hardest thing he could be faced with on a journey of spiritual development, or *Bildungsroman*, would be to recognise and act on that identity, to take up the authority that he was born into in order to save others. Of course, this is precisely what he has to do when he enters the Paths of the Dead, signifying that he not only relinquished control over his physical being but also his very identity. In so doing, he becomes not only the King of Gondor but "King of the Dead"—indeed, King of Death itself. For he has passed through it and emerged on the other side its master. Not by force, obviously, but through the purest, kenotic self-sacrifice; in the end by fulfilment of the death-cycle.

One last cycle begs mention, if ever briefly, as it is the most central tale to the whole saga and therefore needs the least exposition. It is, of course, the story of Frodo Baggins, the diminutive Hobbit, and his gardener, Samwise Gamgee, who must carry the terrible Ring of Power all the way from the far-off Shire deep into the dark and evil kingdom of Sauron, Mordor, against impossible odds so as to at last destroy the thing in Mt. Doom, the point of the artefact's origin. They are led by the creature, Gollum, who is rightly read as a sort of spiritual pole for Frodo. Gollum, of course, being so obsessed with the ring as his former possession that he is willing to serve Frodo and Sam if only to have a hope at manipulating his way to being back in possession of it.

As the Hobbits progress on their journey, it becomes clear that thinking of it as sheer impossibility was in itself naïve, and that what they were journeying towards was certain death, whether or not they actually manage to destroy the Ring. As they enter Mordor, land of countless hostile orcs and polluted to the point where its very

water was poisonous to their lips, the intrepid duo are betrayed and abandoned by Gollum, formerly their guide, who leaves them to try and make their way to Mt. Doom on their own. The closer they come, crawl and stammer the heavier the weight of the Ring becomes on Frodo's neck. Its symbolism is dense. It represents certainly nothing less than the collective power of the lusts of the mortal races. So weighed down by it is Frodo that when they reach the foot of Mt. Doom, not stopping to marvel even at their progress thus far, Frodo stoops to crawl for he can no longer walk. When at last he ceases even to crawl, Samwise carries him on his back. Where once there set out a whole company of men, dwarves, elves and other hobbits from Rivendell with the quest of the Ring's destruction, now only Frodo and Sam remained to complete the task. Yet when, at last, they reach the fiery bowels of the mountain where Frodo is meant to cast the Ring down and destroy it forever, he refrains, now rejuvenated and standing tall: " 'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!' " (*Return* 945).

Here at the very end of his spiritual struggle Frodo proved unequal to the task before him, the temptation of the Ring too great. He had come all this way, separated from home and companions, he resigned himself to death and yet still that decision was too much for him. It was not for raw material existence that he yearned, poised there above the inferno, but for a perverse image of life which was the opposite of kenosis—pure power over others and nature. He had willed so long, but the doing of the thing proved too much. The scene brings to mind the tortured words of St. Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Ro. 7:24). It is at this very moment when all appears and is for all purposes lost that fate, or perhaps that which Tolkien called "Authority" intervened. Gollum enters the scene and struggles with Frodo. The monster manages to gain the Ring from its bearer by

biting off the very finger that wore it. This, then, must be the depths of despair: to have come so far and lose the Ring altogether. Yet at this moment grace intervenes decisively and Gollum, in his ecstasy, dances right off of the ledge and into the fiery pit, destroying both himself and the Ring with him. The mountain shakes to its foundations and erupts, the hobbit pair are left on its slopes quietly awaiting their deaths and the eucatastrophe, arguably,<sup>46</sup> completes itself when they are rescued by an army of giant eagles sent to their aid by Gandalf.

The point of going to such lengths to detail several occurrences of the death-cycle within such a well know narrative as Tolkien's saga is to demonstrate the many possible functions it holds as well as the variety of ways it can be employed. In Tolkien's *Rings*, none of the characters exist to serve as a "Christ" any more than in Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*. In each of their cases, the death cycle was involved for its own sake, because of its inherent power to convey, in Tolkien's words, eucatastrophic grace. They were, in truth, actual sacraments to the narrative effort Tolkien was making.

Likewise, they each involved the kenosis of the subject. For Gandalf it was the emptying of the self and the self's story of meaning and beauty in faith but without hope of any *personal* redemption. For Aragorn it involved a similar abandonment of self in terms of his control over his own identity, his interpretation of destiny, in the form of an adoption of a type of *being-towards-death* which, flipping the scales of reason, then allowed him to take up identity, interpret the *narrative* of his destiny and exhibit authority over the very death to which he surrendered. Lastly, for the poor hobbit, Frodo, it meant a spiritual struggle that saw his very body winnowed

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<sup>46</sup> I would, for instance, maintain that it would have been just as well if Tolkien left the pair there to die happily. But it might be for the joy of their friends that they are maintained.

away as an outward witness to the compliance of his spirit only to be levelled, at last, with the realization that his will was not strong enough to do away with the spiritual burden he bore. In that moment of surrender to his own ineptitude he received a moment of grace and the burden was no more. Just as in the most primal form of baptismal imagery it is apparent that salvation is not something one can accomplish on his own, but must have done for him.

Tolkien is an instrumental subject for this study because, while his figure is now so commercial as to appear radically gauche or lowbrow and tasteless, the emphasis he places on the idea of utter capitulation within the liturgical sphere of his death-cycles is absolutely indispensable in a discussion of the relation between Fantasy, liturgy and hermeneutics. This silence and abnegation is the beginning of the significance of Tolkien's literature as theology. For, as Marion states:

To do theology is not to speak the language of gods or of "God," but to let the Word speak us (or make us speak) in the way that it speaks of and to Gxd [...] for in order to say Gxd one must first let oneself be said by him to the point that, by this docile abandon, Gxd speaks in our speech, just as in the words of the Word sounded the unspeakable Word of his Father. (143-144)

Just as Tolkien seeks to thwart the readers in their attempts to totalise and speak over the text by keeping "allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints" and problematising his own symbols, his characters likewise surrender their own rights and abilities of interpreters of the story which they occupy and exist instead as those things which are said first and only afterwards say themselves.

Without then leaving from the kenotic vision of J.R.R. Tolkien, it is appropriate to continue on in mention of the last author under study in this chapter, J.K. Rowling, a writer singularly obsessed with the goal of keeping her readers guessing. Of course, it was more commercial necessity than artistic conviction which likely drove this ambiguity as the cult of her admirers grew like wildfire over the

course of the publication of her seven volume *Harry Potter* series. Because of the massive amount of scrutiny her plots came under from readers both young and mature, amateur and adult, there was no other option than to remain cryptic both textually and in person whenever interviewers, driven on by the furore of passion her narratives generated, came to her hungry for the one off-hand remark that would prove to be the definitive key statement in unlocking the boy wizard's destiny before it appeared in print. Little did they know then that the real key lay solely in context. The public was well aware, of course, that the somewhat reclusive writer's personal context would come in to play, but with that subject largely out-of-bounds, it was indeed rather odd that no one took seriously *Harry Potter's* identity as a set of British Fantasy novels.

### **Harry Potter and the Death of Fantasy Literature**

One of the factors which likely contributed to the rather mixed critical reception of the *Harry Potter* novels is the dubious recent history of the genre called Fantasy. Indeed, it was the sad wane of this genre into comfortable tropes and exhausted imagery that, at least in part, necessitated the distinction made at the beginning of this thesis between what I have called Fantasy (just that lower reckoning of the form, the simple recreation of genre) and fantasy which exists to challenge perception of the "real." Even the dedicated reader of fantasy (of either sort)—indeed, especially the dedicated reader—must admit that the trend of the genre has been steadily degenerative since Tolkien ceased publishing and that there are precious few exceptions to this rule. Even those novelists who show potential are forced into the mundane by publishers who demand new works at obscene intervals until it becomes difficult to tell one volume from another. At best, fantasy writers have

aspired to be like Vonnegut's cynical (and depreciatory) character, Kilgore Trout—a terrible Sci-Fi writer who happens to have interesting ideas on occasion.

One look at any mainstream book retailer will confirm as much as this. Sci-Fi/Fantasy sections host hordes of identical, mass marketed paperbacks clad in prurient cover art all jostling for position on over-crowded bookshelves like runners at the beginning of a marathon. In such an environment, any attempt in this genre cannot reasonably expect to be received, without patient and dedicated effort, as serious literature. To be an academic approaching Fantasy literature today feels about as appropriate as a monastery in a red light district.

Even so, it is not just the deterioration of the quality of fantasy literature which clouds its reception, but also a loss of imagination as a whole over the later half of the twentieth century. This is, indeed, the strange part of it—that it was neither the depression nor either of the wars of that era which spawned it, but the peace, prosperity and stability of the decades which followed. The narrative seemed to be that all of that great human suffering at the beginning of the twentieth century meant that humans must now grow up and put away the bedtime stories of Romanticism in order to get on with the *real* work of modernity. Yet it is within the very disparaging nihilism, the aching doubt, that humanity finds itself in the ultimate fantasy “Wandering between two worlds.”

Indeed, it was fantasy which sustained western civilisation through the years of struggle, in one form or another. For some it was any of a number of utopian political fantasies, for others it was the sort of extreme scepticism which detached one from reality and for others it was fairy stories. It was in fact materialism, not some high-browed realism or noble sense of responsibility which killed Imagination as the Romantics and their disciples had known it. Even as the cultural struggle is

traditionally posited as the interplay of science and religion, with science being the inevitable, predetermined winner, it is clear that the narrative itself is a fanciful one. As physicists move further and further into the nature of existence and the very fabric of reality, terms like “fuzzy logic” and ideas such as quantum mechanics abound. They depend on paradoxical metaphors and Kantian lateral reasoning to derive their consistency:

Quantum physics gives an example of a reality which is concrete and but also enigmatic, and which must be interpreted on its own terms. The paradoxes and counter-intuitive nature of quantum theory do not lead physicists to abandon reason; rather the *dialectical* nature of our knowledge compels physicists to adopt a more *critical* realism. (Myers and McKenzie 49-66)

The philosophical underpinnings of the triumphalist, progressive narrative of post-Enlightenment reason were swept away by Thomas Kuhn’s classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Then came the Post-Modernism of Continental philosophy, which radically problematised meta-narratives as a whole and the very language with which modernists espoused their confidence.

Yet even this movement could not do away with Modernism as such and all the time imagination and fantasy suffered under the terrible weight of materialism. It was perhaps *because* the Western world now had so very much material that it forgot the lessons of its ideological ancestors who, even as they laid the bricks of existential epistemology, radically subverted its very existence (as shall be seen through Hume, Kierkegaard and others in the following chapter). Had these dogmatists, even presently, much less in terms of material (either possessions or existence itself) as so many others in the world actually do, they would likely think rather differently in terms of their claims that nothing extends beyond the material. In this way the *Empire* of Post-Enlightenment “reason” proves to be less ideological than material (and therefore propagandistic).

It must, then, come as no surprise that the conception of *Harry Potter* famously came at a point in the life of its author in which very little was available in terms of material comfort. The story is now famous in which the struggling single mother, overwhelmed with the raw difficulty of simple daily existence, scratched out on café napkins an outline for a story about a boy who, like herself, was caught in a rough life with little material freedom and little comfort and even less love when, in a *euclastrophic* moment, he is swept away into a hidden but connected world in which he has an identity, freedom, power, acceptance, love and, yes, destiny and purpose. The truth of the matter is that had Rowling written her now treasured tale at a different moment in history it might have gone unnoticed for many years until it was rediscovered at precisely the moment in which its voice needed to be heard.

The fact is, no matter how cynical one chooses to be about its material success, that *Harry Potter* was born into a world which desperately needed it. It voiced out a rebellion against the rampant empiricism and materialism at a point when people the world around were ready to listen in and join the effort. The edifice had long been crumbling, eroded long ago by the changing tide of philosophy, but in order to complete the coup the public needed a *gospel* that they could identify with and rally behind. Now, *Harry Potter* stands as a symbol of cultural resistance. It is, of course, only the very beginning if it even turns out to be anything at all. But, one can see that it is heading along the right path when even the academy has taken up the banner of its cause. If the panel at the 2008 meeting of the American Academy of Religion titled “The Potterian Way of Death: J.K. Rowling’s Conception of Mortality” is any testament, the significance of Rowling’s work is just beginning to be recognised, not only as a cultural phenomenon but as a cultural *movement*.

The world of *Harry Potter* has been, since the very first, one that not only reflected Christian types and figures but that was actually saturated in Christian thought. Yet for most devoted readers across the length of time in which the novels were being written and published, whether this was an intended, accidental or inevitable reality was a question of significant debate. Rowling herself remained almost entirely silent on the subject, despite the fact that she could have likely escaped the fury of fundamentalist Christians everywhere from the American South to the Holy See had she done otherwise, knowing that to acknowledge the place of Christianity within her work would be to admit that it could only ever end one way. Rowling expressed this sentiment in an interview saying, "To me [the religious parallels have] always been obvious. But I never wanted to talk too openly about it because I thought it might show people who just wanted the story where we were going" (Adler).

Rowling's work was one of the few in the twentieth century that truly existed within the tradition of MacDonald. Therefore, there was really never any question as to whether or not the death-cycle would reveal itself at one point or another because it is this type, itself a liturgical remembrance of Christ's Passion, which is the making of what Tolkien considers to be a "happy ending" and what others simply deem as the standard for being a "good story." This is why Phillip Pullman's attempt at an atheistic fantasy is not as successful as Rowling's more traditional effort. In the first part, it fails to be actually atheistic and reverts into the rather primordial Sophia worship of some of ancient theistic mysticism. Secondly, its best attempt at a happy ending, highlighted by Tolkien as the very heart of fantasy, is the identification of *eros* with "Dust" (which is best read in the novels as wisdom or truth), a revelation which, if pursued to its logical end, would make prostitutes the philosophers of the

world. Whereas Rowling has rescued Fantasy in its ability to challenge assumptions and change its readers, Pullman is simply another peddler of unusual pornography, disturbingly marketed to children as a manifesto of modern, scientific wisdom and enlightenment.

This is the paradox, indeed, the challenge and promise, of the tradition of “Western” culture at present: in a cultural and intellectual atmosphere which makes theistic belief sometimes difficult and other times impossible, it is still those stories which speak in the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection, of love in the way of self-sacrifice, of victory over the total negation of speech and experience which is death, which have the greatest power to move, inspire and transform the very core of a person. What does it mean to have a society which inherits distrust of the Christian gospels as objects but still constantly gropes for the Christian Gospel in its substance, as a fantastic story which irreducibly subverts perceptions and poses the power to eucatastrophically change lives? Why is it possible to believe in the *kerygma* of *Harry Potter* but not in that same *kerygma* as expressed in the Bible? To answer such questions is essentially one of the goals of this project, but one cannot allow the horse before the cart and begin to answer at present. First it is necessary to examine for one last time the structure of the *myth* in *Harry Potter* which inspires both joy and belief. Only then will it be possible to make claims about its relation to the MacDonald tradition of Fantasy and indeed to liturgy and the formation of belief.

The life of Harry Potter is one marked more than any others studied thus far by the seal of destiny. As an infant his parents were killed by an evil wizard who styled himself Lord Voldemort although he had been born as the rather ordinary Tom Riddle. Voldemort was obsessed with power and immortality so that when he received information concerning a baby which, as he interpreted the prophecy, would

be the end of him should he not kill it first he moved decisively to eliminate this mysterious rival. He succeeded in killing Harry's father, James, without any resistance and killed Harry's mother as well when she interceded between the villain and her son. But when the Dark Lord turned on Harry, several inexplicable things happened. Firstly, he was undone by the power of the love that Lily had poured out as a sacrifice for her son. Secondly, a mysterious bond was created between the two, represented in Harry by a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead which sometimes allowed him to perceive Voldemort's thoughts and, on one occasion, allowed Voldemort to possess his body.

The more Harry learned about his own personal history and the prophecy that was made concerning himself and Voldemort the more he sensed that he had to play a crucial part in the permanent elimination of the Dark Lord. Yet, not having the full measure of information on the subject (which was possessed alone by his headmaster and mentor, Albus Dumbledore, who himself was never in complete control of events) he was free to and did on many occasions err in his interpretation of this destiny only for it to be revealed to him in the very last chapter of the final volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).

If the title alone was not menacing enough, nor the prophecy that "either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives" which hung over Harry's head and in the minds of readers, then the two quotations which open the last volume should leave no doubt as to the path that this final episode would lay out for Harry. They are significant enough that they bear quotation at length here. The first is from Aeschylus' tragedy *The Libation Bearers*:

Oh, the torment bred in the race,  
                   the grinding scream of death  
                   and the stroke that hits the vein  
                   the haemorrhage none can staunch, the grief,

the curse that no man can bear [...]

Now hear, you blissful powers underground—  
answer the call, send help.

Bless the children, give them triumph now (qtd. in *Hallows* xi)

Like Lewis, and indeed MacDonald, Rowling draws inspiration from sources that expand beyond the realm of Christian literature but which, when made subservient to their appropriation, reflect its nature and substance. It is, in its way, an affirmation of the truth which all fantasists hold dear, that there is truth to be had in myth which exists only in fragments of shadows elsewhere. The second quotation synthesises the first. It is from the Quaker leader, William Penn's *More Fruits of Solitude*:

Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the seas; they live in one another still. For they must needs be present, that love and live in that which is omnipresent. In this divine glass, they see face to face; their converse is free, as well as pure. This is the comfort of friends, that though they may be said to die, yet their friendship and society are, in the best sense, ever present, because immortal. (qtd. in *Hallows* xi)

This, then, is the setting for the final adventure of Harry Potter. The words are potent because of how many deceased “friends” Harry has by the beginning of the seventh book. His two parents, of course, his close friend and Godfather, Sirius Black, his mentor, Albus Dumbledore as well as, by the book's end, several other friends and teachers.

Rowling said of the quotations, "I'd known it was going to be those two passages since 'Chamber' [1998] was published. I always knew [that] if I could use them at the beginning of book seven then I'd cued up the ending perfectly. If they were relevant, then I went where I needed to go" (Adler). All along, Harry had been unknowingly treading ever onwards towards early end. All Harry has, though, until his Swan Song is upon him is his own broken interpretations of the cryptic prophecy which had been made concerning him. At last, it is the memory of his (perceived) arch-enemy, the double agent Professor Snape, given up magically in vision as he lay

dying, which shows Harry what the plan, Dumbledore's plan, had been all along. Harry learns at last the full measure of his connection to Voldemort, that he had received an actual fragment of the Dark Lord's soul which split off from him after the terrible and unimaginably evil act of trying to kill a baby which bonded to him, the victim, although Voldemort did not know it. Thus, as long as Harry lived a portion of Voldemort would live also. "So the boy [...] the boy must die?" Harry sees Snape ask Dumbledore in his memory. "And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential" Dumbledore answered (*Hallows* 686).

The text reveals how Harry thought about this fact, this utter condemning to total demise, and how it constituted betrayal on the part of Dumbledore. Even so he chose to take the path as it had been planned for him. He chose it because he, like Dumbledore, knew it was right. He knew that it was the only way:

Finally, the truth [...] Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms [...] Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him [...] If he could only have died like Hedwig, so quickly he would not have known it had happened! Or if he could have launched himself in front of a wand to save someone he loved [...] He envied even his parent's deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. (692)

He would have to face death alone, as well. The guild of his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, would have to be left behind as they would try to save him instead of allowing him to accomplish death. There had been a battle that night. Violence and death were yet strewn around as Harry, during a chilling respite, learned of what he must do.

It was, to their world, an apocalypse—a battle to end all battles as such. The battleground was none other than Hogwarts school itself and the Dark Lord and his minions had withdrawn to await Harry, for even he knew that Harry would not allow

his friends to die when his death alone would satiate the Dark Lord's rage. It is in this moment when Rowling arguably produces the crowning achievement of her literary effort. For as the cold realisation descends on Harry and he withdraws to the forest where he will meet his end Rowling well and truly grabs hold of her readers' hearts. In this moment of sheer, primal humanity—primal in its highest and lowest senses—there is no device, no fanciful invention, no literary tool which can distract from what is happening. A boy walks to his death; “Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts pattered against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die” (693). It is ugly, bloody and abhorrent. Yet it is, to couch it in liturgical terms, the terrible necessity of the devouring of divine flesh and blood:

“At the heart of the [Eucharistic] mystery there is an irreducible violence and a necessary scandal of the flesh, an insistent reminder that the body cannot be removed from thought, and that human history, red in tooth and claw, swims in the river of blood from its torn and shredded victims, torn by hatred and torn by desire.” (Jasper, *Body* 109)

In this moment one reads not a fantastic, whimsical fiction of a boy who learns to use wands and ride a broomstick, but the very deep-rooted myth of humanity as perceived through the Christian gospel and its liturgical representations—be they in churches or novels. There can be no doubt in this moment, literary or otherwise, because death is itself the central mystery of human existence.

The account which Rowling gives of Harry's death march is a chilling one and represents the very furthest extent of her abilities as a writer. The tortuous extremity and crushing totality of the protagonist's fate is not something which the reader may simply identify with, but which actually becomes real. The reader's heart beats all the quicker because it knows the negation which is to come, nausea flows in a wave over the gut which senses the encroaching horror and the heart is torn apart in the *excruciating* agony that grips the innermost being when *death* becomes *reality*. The

liturgical moment is so profound that its intertextuality actually becomes something much more like “metatextuality” and words of the Passion and of the Bible itself echo and reverberate through it.

*[...] his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

With everything in his being, the reader wishes, like Harry, that this fate would pass away from him. Yet with every line he reads he forces Harry that one step closer to that dreadful fate. He cannot stop reading and Harry cannot stop walking. It is necessary that both go on.

Then, a grace appears from the depths of despair. Harry finds an artefact left to him by the departed Dumbledore. It is one of the trinity of artefacts which give the novel its name, a Deathly Hallow, so-called because it was said to be given as a reward by Death himself. It is a stone which will allow, for a time, the appearance of loved ones deceased, “as though by a veil” (Rowling, *Beedle* 92). When Harry uses it, there appear before him his parents, Godfather and a pair of his friends who had been lost in the preceding battle. They walk with him, beaming their pride and admiration. “You’ve been so brave” says the mother he never knew; “You are nearly there, very close. We are [...] so proud of you” says his father (Rowling, *Hallows* 699).

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses [...]*

Harry, who had come so far in becoming a man, matured far beyond his years by the trials he had faced in his short, traumatic life, was reduced to the likeness of a child, grasping all about himself for reassurance:

“Does it hurt?”

The childish question had fallen from Harry’s lips before he could stop it.

“Dying? Not at all,” said Sirius. “Quicker and easier than falling asleep” [...]

“You’ll stay with me?”

“Until the very end,” said James.

“They will not be able to see you?” asked Harry.

“We are a part of you,” said Sirius. “Invisible to anyone else.”

Harry looked at his mother.

“Stay close to me,” he asked quietly. (699-700)

In death, all mankind is reduced to infancy. Not only are people often old, infirm, and dependent at the time of their deaths, but the very nature of the experience itself confounds all *lived* experience. There is nothing on earth that can prepare one for the enormous negation of death. It is utterly *other*, it must be learned as man learns all things—by stumbling along, wailing for help and, finally, by simply doing.

*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*

It is the might of a fairy tale which brings Harry, full of courage though ever wavering, to the point of his heroic death. Underlying the entire narrative is a myth, said to be a children’s story, of the three Deathly Hallows. According to their legend, they were given to three wizard brothers who cheated Death by conjuring a bridge over a dangerous stream. Death sought to trick them by offering them each a reward of their choosing through which he hoped to sow their demise. The first brother was violent and wished for an unbeatable wand but was soon murdered in his sleep and

the wand stolen away. The second brother was proud and wanted to humiliate Death, so he wished for something which could bring back the dead. He was given the Resurrection Stone, the very object Harry was using on his way to die. But the second brother was soon driven mad by the transience of those he brought back and slew himself so he could be with them. The third brother was wise and wished for something that would allow him to escape Death and never be found by him. Death was much put out at this request, and grudgingly bequeathed to the brother an invisibility cloak whose guise even he could not penetrate. When the man had lived to a ripe age he left the cloak to his son, “And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life” (Rowling, *Beedle* 87-93).

Harry was unwittingly wearing this very cloak as he escaped from Hogwarts unnoticed and walked into the enemy’s camp. He had been in possession of the cloak ever since he arrived at Hogwarts and it never seemed extraordinary to him. In truth, it hid him from Death on more than one occasion. At last he saw Voldemort and he longed for it to be over. He dropped first the stone, his comforters disappeared, and then he took off his cloak and looked his enemy in the eyes. He was greeting death as an old friend. “He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone” (*Hallows* 704).

*[...] Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

Yet this is not the end. That this is not the end should not surprise those familiar with the tradition within which Rowling was writing does not mean that it also diminishes either the ground shaking tragedy of the event of Harry’s death nor

the joy and triumph of the moment when he regains consciousness and finds himself in an empty King's Cross station on a bench with Albus Dumbledore. Surprised to find himself in a state which Dumbledore declares as somewhat other than dead, Harry exclaims, "But I should have died—I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!" (708). He was worried, of course, that he had not achieved his purpose. But the shard of Voldemort that was within him had perished. He had, in a sense, died—but the fact that he chose to do it in order to save others, in Dumbledore's words, "made all the difference" (708).

*Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?*

In the end, Harry returns to life to banish Voldemort from the world altogether and forever. His ultimate demise was in fact a lack of knowledge. It was not a lack of knowledge in the terms of how to make things work, how to accomplish one's ends and the like. Rather, it was a lack of knowledge of the proper meaning of things that destroyed him. Dumbledore says to Harry, "Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped" (710).

*Out of the mouths of babes you have ordained strength.*

Harry Potter represents a timely and powerful incarnation of the death-cycle. It, in fact, sounds the death knoll for the death of fantasy. Indeed, as Harry reads on the gravestone of his parents, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (328).

That untold millions of readers across the globe have trod the same road to death as Harry, have experienced the joy of his return to life demonstrates perhaps better than anything else the power of Fantasy literature to perform as liturgy. It is not simply a singular remembrance or a solitary tribute to a biblical type, for it joins precisely in the form set out by MacDonald over a century ago as not a recreation of the Passion, but a celebration and *anamnesis* of it. If Harry Potter were simply just one more Christological figure in the literature of the English language, he would not be significant as such. He is, however, much more than this. He is the power of Fantasy to act as liturgy—that is, to problematise perceptions of reality and inspire a new belief or perspective that enables the participant (reader or worshiper) to navigate the reality of life between two worlds.

### **Liturgy as Fantasy**

So then, is the relationship between liturgy and Fantasy one way? Does Fantasy literature simply borrow from the liturgy in order to accomplish its ends or does the relationship go deeper? J.R.R. Tolkien has already been summoned for his view that the Gospel is the truest or ultimate fairy story. In what way is this true, though? Is it true only because of its happy ending? Certainly not, for in the Gospel one finds an ultimate and irreducible literary paradox. For God, who is radically *other* in both nature and character, was made flesh and dwelled among men. That which was invulnerable made itself frail, fragile and subject to infirmity. He who was both immanent and transcendent through the world (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν), emptied himself and took on the form of a human and a servant (Phil. 2:5-11). What is more, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God,” (2 Co. 5:21). Still further, God, who being immortal cannot

die, did die. The God who is one as in the *shemah* became sundered: “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani?” (Mt. 27:46). And, for the final *coup de grâce* to any hope of comprehension, to complete the wonderful absurdity of the whole event, that which could not die and did die came back to life! This sudden and ironic turn, which in Tolkien is the token eucatastrophe, is the scandal to the Jews and stupidity to the Gentiles of 1 Corinthians 1:23. It is the story for which Paul is both derided and applauded at the Areopagus in Acts 17.

The story is Fantasy at its uttermost, it is a paradox and an impossibility. It is easily derided and yet, like all Fantasy, so radically destabilises perceptions of reality to the point where the joy of it can actually engender belief and in doing so becomes “the power of God for salvation” (Ro. 1:16).

[T]he Word of the Cross effectuates the transcendence of the *Logos* by setting it over against the paradoxical figure of the servant who is obedient to death, even death on the Cross. The Cross is thus the place where two excesses intersect, the one by which thought itself is outpassed, the other where willing ceases, especially the willing of oneself in any form. (Breton 1)

This scene where thought and willing cease is, then, paradoxically the place where life begins in earnest, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Lk. 9:24). Indeed, the whole fabric of the kingdom of God which the cross of Christ is meant to establish must operate in paradox, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom,” (1 Co. 1:25). Therefore it should come as no surprise that those who are weak and foolish are the ones marked out by Christ in the Beatitudes as being “blessed”. Nor should it be amazing that Jesus’ own statements concerning the kingdom picture it as something which is at once present, imminent and to come in the more distant future.

The difficulty of it is that while the Cross has interjected the kingdom into a world which is not-kingdom, that interjection has not to date done away with the not-

kingdom placing those new citizens of the “*otherly*” realm in the awkward position of existing in both. They live, as it were, a fantasy. They live as fools, but the height of their foolishness is not the fact that they affirm the fantastic as ultimately real—for this is only the beginning of the thing—but that, because of this they actually live the scandal, the ludicrousness of Christ’s Passion, his kenosis. Breton affirms this strange truth:

All those who have followed him [Christ] have lived and verified the Pauline assertion “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” Folly consists indeed in “being outside of the self” and alienated in that Other who becomes one’s very depth. This ecstatic going out of the self, Plato’s *Mania*, is also a reduction, a simplification that returns unceasingly from the world where it must live, to this sign, to this *Eidos* where it expires. A reduction, but also an anamnesis of the one thing necessary to the forces of oblivion. (42)

This return and expiration, which Breton rightly deems an anamnesis, is the heart and function of liturgy. The same mechanism which allows fantasy to function as literature enables liturgy to be the vessel which sails the fantastic other-world which is the existence between two worlds. For when reading a fantasy novel one must suspend disbelief in the first place and then also adopt a temporary literary belief wherever the narrative retains an internal cohesion. But this is not the end of the process, there is indeed much more mystery involved. For, seizing upon this belief—be it however temporary—fantasy can and does grasp onto the reader, draw him into a position necessitating self-criticism and, by eroding the artificiality of its relationship to “the real”<sup>47</sup> and upsetting associated assumed hierarchies between “real” and “imaginary,” can actually change the way he perceives himself and experience and transform the way he interacts with the world. From this standpoint he is liberated

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<sup>47</sup> Two examples of this already noted phenomenon being when Harry finds biblical quotations on his parents’ tomb even though the entire world before this moment had been devoid of both God and religion as such as well as the moment at which Anodos admits that his time in Faerie Land was not a dream and that he will return there one day through his grave.

with the claim that the Fantasy is more real than what he once construed as reality. As he continues on in his life, the perceived ethical implications of his altered perspective (and identity) will either help or hinder the navigation of life experiences, based of course on whether or not there was actually any truth to the fantasy at all (and, as MacDonald says, the more truly beautiful the Fantasy, the more it must reflect truth).

Worship, or liturgy, functions the same way. It creates a temporary space in which paradoxical or fantastic thinking and acting can take place. The negativity of experience which reflects the non-kingdom nature of the worshipper's daily surroundings as well as any lingering trace of disbelief (for those who are in fact "believers," the proportion being obviously greater for those who claim no belief or who struggle greatly with it) are suspended, and all of the congregation—Christians or otherwise—are beckoned to participate in actions which assume the supreme actuality of the numinous and fantastical kingdom of God. Wherein this process succeeds in creating belief, so too it also creates Real Presence. Even more so, where this belief partakes in this Presence, as a sacrament, kenosis is complete and change begins. Breton says of such worshipers, "Living utopias, they seem to meander between heaven and earth" (34). Bridget Nichols affirms this, saying:

The whole Christian background to acts of liturgical worship is rooted in the seeming paradox of giving up one's identity in order to recover an identity in Christ. This is not so much a paradox, however, as a hermeneutic exchange. The impetus of liturgical action is towards the transformation of individuals, who discover a new identity as members of a worshipping community engaged in a journey of faith. In the return movement, that community is continually reconfigured by responding to individual needs in the context of its own action. It is this reconfigured community that returns from worship to life in the secular world. (26)

Of course this giving up of one's identity is an act of supreme folly which should obviously not be taken seriously. Yet, at the same point, it is the only way of

reconciling to the *Other*—whether the relative *other* of human relationships or the radical *Other* of the divine. In this way it is also the only way of reading, with the author/text as *other*, as Jasper insists in calling for the reader to become “utterly decentred” (*Body* 58-59).

In both liturgy and hermeneutics one approaches a vulnerability. In hermeneutics it is the vulnerability of the author who has given himself over in the *body* of his text that at one point it was even possible to declare that the author is dead. In the liturgy it is God who has been made vulnerable as Word made flesh (indeed, he has been declared dead by Nietzsche, Altizer and many others, but this is nothing new for him—life to death to life seems to be the *modus operandi*). Both have been the subject of violence by their various interpretive communities, thus also a great deal of “reading” and “religion” amount to nothing more than either blind or malicious violence.

Why, then, is violence still at the very centre of the Christian liturgy? It is a sign of the vulnerability of God in his love for mankind and the hatred with which man has treated both God and his brother and sister in the way of Cain. It is not an event recreated out of malice or perverse bloodthirst, but a remembrance of the significance of that vulnerability for the human relationship with the divine. It is not a celebration of violence, but the simple affirmation that it must be recognised before it can be dealt with. For the violence, emptying and death of the cross speaks towards the healing, exultation and life present in the resurrection—the two constitute one event—just as the Eucharistic meal points at the new life and exchanged identity present in baptism. The process is a transformative one, and this is its entire purpose.

The only right response to the vulnerability present in both text and Word is a response in kind. It is that thing which Fantasy literature in particular has always

demanded—that the reader for a moment make himself subject to the stipulations of another and, in that subjection, suffer the possibility of being changed. Anyone who refuses to do this may do any number of things with a fantastic text, but he cannot read it. Likewise, anyone who enters into the liturgy stubbornly refusing to admit its premises, scorning all the time its ludicrousness, can say many things about liturgy but it cannot fully understand what it is or claim to have experienced it in the same way as a true participant.

At this point it is appropriate to at last return to a question introduced earlier in this chapter which was at the time dismissed. The question was why it was possible for so many to toss aside reasonability and adopt a literary suspension of disbelief to the point that the actual *kerygma* in this case of the *Harry Potter* novels could be adopted, while the same *kerygma* in the biblical gospels remains largely, intentionally neglected for so many of the very same readers. In the end, it cannot be anything other than the subjective choice of an individual. It is dependent less on what an individual is willing to believe, even if only in a temporary sense, and much more on the threat perceived to be inherent to such a belief as well as the strength and profligacy of negative assumptions about the text under consideration. Nicholls states that:

for textual purposes, the liturgical process begins with an assumption of the Faith, but that it only comes to its fulfilment through an act of faith made possible by performance. The liturgical action marks the crossing of the divide between the Faith and faith [where “the Faith” is the collective creedal faith of the Church based on biblical witness and tradition]. Liturgy is therefore a discourse, a practice, generated by the tension between faith and the Faith [...] Hermeneutics can proclaim this as a possibility, but cannot force it into being. The final task—the leap of faith—always lies with the performers at each enactment. (Nicholls 26-27)

The point is that the decision to approach any fantastic requires the same faith and the same performance. It is not in its nature a different thing to *make believe* for *Harry*

*Potter* than it is to do the same for the Bible, the two are hermeneutically the same. Indeed, it is just as necessary when evaluating it for the thing that it is rather than as an object to be put to use for the sake of a religion, philosophy, historical narrative, or political ideology. The key in any of these cases is not just the existence of a hermeneutical system but the actual act of performing faith.

This is not in any fashion a prejudice in favour of those who espouse particular beliefs as the only “authorised” readers of their own theology. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. For any “believer” must similarly suspend all of his own belief which is effectively as prohibitive as any negative assumption. This way of reading, of imagining, is in fact the only way of doing theology also. It places all people on equal footing before texts and, truly, in equality with the texts themselves so that the present becomes a time in which “genuinely imaginative theology [...] has again become possible” (Jasper, *Body* 157). For it is not only the portion of society which has been alienated from theology by the entrenchment of Enlightenment reasoning, even as it crumbles into bits, for whom theology has become impossible, but also those who, unknowingly, have been pushed away from theology by Theology itself.

Therefore liturgy and Fantasy, ever entwined and consubstantial, present a way for both believers and unbelievers to meet together, again, as equals at the text of theology. Who will risk the *kenosis* of being read? Who will suffer the possibility that not only might his ideas and opinions be changed as in any intellectual exercise, but even more his beliefs and his very self? Theology is dangerous occupation, losing himself is the minimum requisite. Yet it is not what he might lose, but what he might gain which is at stake. It is the very risk of belief, its seemingly tenuous epistemological foundations, which must next be investigated.

## Chapter 4: Epistemology and Fantasy

### **Textually Transmitted Diseases: the Risk of Hermeneutical Intimacy**

It all began with Aristotle. Yet, perhaps this is a minor misstatement, for the idea goes back at least to his mentor, Plato, before him. Still, Aristotle provides a wonderful starting place for a discussion on categories of truth and the epistemology of belief simply because his statement on the subject is so well known and foundational. Writing, of course, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes “Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of a graver import than history,” (27). Now, Aristotle was certainly not an adversary of history, nor did he find it a trivial matter. His statement was fuelled by his belief that universals were categorically more important than particulars. *De facto*, then, he creates what is essentially an epistemological hierarchy between literary forms.

Whereas commitment to Aristotle’s strict theory of universal and particular has come and gone over the centuries, what has remained is this (often in the minority) nagging insistence that there is truth in places other than those privileged by a given society or intellectual hegemony and that there are indeed categories of truth with even the possibility of qualitative difference between them. Generally, this cause has been one championed by various literary and artistic cliques already on the margins of society and, since at least the nineteenth century, losing the last vestiges of their prestige to an ever more encroaching and leviathan amalgamation of Enlightenment reason. Yet the artists were not the only voice of alterity in this discussion, they were eventually accompanied to a certain extent in this trend by the philosophers. For both had in common the fact that their enterprise consisted more of considering those things possible while science dazzled societies with its inventions

and the intellectual allure of *proving* the *actual*. No longer were the greatest thinkers among men dependent on strict rationalisation but, buoyed by an investigative empiricism, man could now set his sights on actual achievements which could not themselves simply be brushed aside by a subsequent generation of thinkers. A steam engine, a telegraph machine, a light bulb—these were actual objects which could be seen, touched, experienced and indeed be made useful. What had Kant ever done for the Shropshire farmer, the Manchester mill worker, the London mother of twelve?

No longer did it seem so *Romantic* or important to make a career of sitting, thinking and writing. The nineteenth century was an age of industry, a time for doing and accomplishing. In this sort of ultra-materialistic environment it was indeed very difficult for poets and subsequently philosophers to hold their ground and not be bullied out of the way by engineers, biologists, physicists and the medical sciences. Even within literature itself during this period there was a sharp divide between the direction being taken by a majority of novelists towards realism and the darker literary underbelly of the time. Most recognisable among the dissidents were the Gothic writers, as in the case of Mary Shelley, who asked very directly questions like “Where is this science taking us?”

Two important things ought to be noticed here about the Gothic phenomenon in the nineteenth century. Firstly, Gothic often was an expression of the same rigid realism of other standard fiction at the time. While something might at first *seem* out of place or contradictory to popular paradigm, it would turn out a ruse in the end and some trope like Sherlock Holmes would come along and explain how it all was perfectly reasonable. This is what made Gothic so entertaining in many instances, that it allowed its readers to have fright and then laugh at their own silly mistake and inner suspiciousness. For Gothic was not truly Gothic unless one could, in the end,

mock the crude, *unenlightened* superstition of it all. This is certainly what is going on in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for instance. This is also why Gothic literature so often features women, or in the case of *The Castle of Otranto*, peasants—naturally these sort of people are weak minded and would be more prone to be subject to a superstitious whimsy and even more so to believe it. This is also, of course, why particularly evangelicals through this period insisted so sternly on keeping Gothic “romances” out of the hands of (young) women.

The second aspect of Gothic which needs drawn out was hinted at by the first—this is that Gothic itself was rarely ever meant to be at all “serious” and often got quite a poor reception when it did. The overarching purpose or function of Gothic was to entertain, not to lastingly challenge people’s perceptions of reality. As insidiously spine-chilling as much of the very good Gothic literature was, it was important to be able to dismiss it rather rapidly after one had finally closed the book. This is why stories like James’ “Turn of the Screw” were and indeed still are much more disturbing than some of their peers—for James offers no consolation, no salve or cordial, nothing that would make the haunting image of malevolent spirits preying on children any more palatable. It is no wonder why these, one could call them “unequivocal,” works were in the minority of the genre throughout the period.

All of this, then, is to say that Gothic differs from what I am calling fantasy in this work in that it simply seeks to twist or play with the “rules” of reality or the metanarrative of Enlightenment whereas fantasy seeks to subvert its privileged status altogether and does so rather audaciously. This begins to speak of the risk of fantasy. In truth, it is really the risk of all literature. But where this risk might be subtle and cunning in some recesses of narrative and poetry it is forthright and brazen within fantasy literature. The risk is very much in the open and unabashed with fantasy and

perhaps this contributes to its own particular powerfulness. This was the risk that the Puritans sensed when they strove to keep fiction out of the hands of the impressionable. They knew the convicting power of literature because of their own devotion to the Scriptures. Yet other texts were *a priori* regarded as unsafe, unhygienic, unwholesome.

Their logic was the same as those who encourage abstinence as a way of combating venereal disease; by limiting the number of texts one interacted with it was possible to minimise or negate the likelihood of some sort of intellectual malady. But there is no such thing as a “pure” text or a “virgin” text (and no such thing as a virgin-birthed text, either). They are randy, prurient little things. When one speaks of texts one must mention their “textual immorality,” their proclivity towards incest and orgies and all other manner of activities usually listed under “do not” in the Bible. Of course, not even the Bible is “pure” in this sense (one might even say *especially* not the Bible!). Who would have expected that in its “God-breathed” pages one might find an unwelcome lover—“What’s this? Greek Poetry? Why Paul, how could you?”

Every textual experience bears risk, every sexual experience bears risk—if not the risk of exposure, then the risk of vulnerability. What is worse, Chlamydia or heartbreak? Intimacy is dangerous not only because it exposes but because it gambles with losing control to the Other, even, perhaps, to the point of kenosis. When one reads, he braves the possibility not only of what he might do to the text (if he holds it in high regard) but of what it might do to him (can it be trusted?). The risk is a social one as well. Derrida might be good-looking, but also the worst date ever—such a conversation killer! Likewise in some circles it would doubtless be scandalous to go about arm-in-arm with a Heidegger or a Proust and in most places it is certainly most

unfashionable to get caught out as the Gospel of St. Matthew's innamorato. When one chooses a lover, consents to intimacy, it constitutes an act of faith—a true *credo*, a crediting of that other person with the belief that she or he will not take advantage of or manipulate that bond, that exposure and insecurity. Now, such a decision is never based on an accumulation of experiences, for more often than not such liaisons result in more pain than pleasure. So why do people do it? Why read? Why take a lover, husband or wife? If not based on evidence, then why suffer such an irrationality? It is, of course, because the promise of the possible which, to nicely return to Aristotle, is more important to people than the actual. Aristotle's statement is not philosophical, not axiomatic; it is an observation. It is the case because human beings have and continue to make it the case.

Now, just as there are degrees of intimacy, so are there degrees of risk. There is only a little risk in a blind date. The worst that could happen is to have to endure a tedious evening or the awkwardness of cutting an engagement short by saying, "Look, this really is not working for me." There is more risk in an one night stand and even more risk than that in a marriage vow. The goal of this chapter is to consider the scope, degree and type of risk involved in temporary, literary belief, the same sort of belief encountered in liturgical enactment as I have posited previously, and to contextualise it among the other strands of belief which are more commonly or thoughtlessly engaged in contemporary society. This will mean investigating what can be loosely called the epistemology of belief, starting in the Victorian era with the main subjects of our discussion and following on into the present.

### **The Hermeneutical “Leap”**

To start the discussion it is appropriate to consider first that eminent Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, not because his influence on his period was the greatest, but because he exemplifies the intellectual struggle and the way in which thinking persons were made to “go on” with their faith in the face of an epistemology which gradated towards empiricism. It is Kierkegaard, undoubtedly, who coins the definitive axiom for theistic belief in the face of empirical indeterminacy, the “leap of faith”—or, at least, this was the metaphor he used if not the phrase itself.

Kierkegaard was an intellectual paradox: he at once doubted most vehemently and thoroughly yet he also believed the most fervently and passionately. For him faith was not a cool wager, as for Pascal, nor the sum of evidence as it will be seen in Cardinal Newman. No, it was an epic journey, a life-shattering decision based from the very bottom of his soul and coursing through his entire body and out through his thin, worn down fingertips.

Kierkegaard was nothing if not bold. His decisive grandeur would echo throughout philosophical theology even into the work of Tillich who wrote of “the courage to be.” Regard the intense urgency with which he discusses his decision in a journal entry dated 1 August, 1835:

And so the die is cast—I cross the Rubicon! This road certainly leads me to strife; but I shall not give up ... I will hurry along the path I have discovered, greeting those whom I meet on my way, not looking back as did Lot’s wife, but remembering it is a hill up which we have to struggle. (Kierkegaard 6)

For Kierkegaard, one who doubted above and beyond even most every sceptic, the doubt itself had none of the noble, Byronic overtones which it did in Britain (and here, perhaps, is the greatest benefit of his being Danish). In his thinking, doubt was less legitimate than faith because its assumptions were in fact greater than those of

faith and instead of producing a healthy, productive life yielded only paranoia and indecision. In 1841 he writes:

My doubt is terrible.—Nothing can withstand it—it is a cursed hunger and I can swallow up every argument, every consolation and sedative—I rush at 10,000 miles a second through every obstacle. It is a positive starting point for philosophy when Aristotle says that philosophy begins with wonder, not as in our day with doubt. Moreover the world will learn that the thing is not to begin with the negative, and the reason why it has succeeded up to the present is that it has never really given itself over to the negative, and so has never seriously done what it said. Its doubt is mere child's play. The idea of philosophy is mediation<sup>48</sup>—Christianity's is the paradox. (14)

It wasn't doubt which was necessarily the most problematic aspect of the thinking of his contemporaries, but the way in which it was utilised by philosophers, as antithesis, in order to systematise, synthesise and ultimately sterilise all of existence.

According to Kierkegaard, Christianity's "idea" is necessary because in its paradox, which in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) he calls "the paradox of life and experience," there is something much more *real* or substantive than philosophy which sought to categorise an indeterminate, continuing world which was full of both paradox and possibility (126). It is this paradox which urges him to "begin with wonder" rather than the negative which seeks to synthesise existence as if it were a chemical equation needing to be balanced. How can he take such a position? Does he experience no fear? What if he is wrong? Did he simply indulge in self-delusion for the sake of his own comfort? In another journal entry from 1839 he writes:

The whole of existence frightens me, from the smallest fly to the mystery of the Incarnation, everything is unintelligible to me, most of all myself; the whole of existence is poisoned in my sight, particularly myself. Great is my sorrow and without bounds; no man knows it, only God in heaven, and he will not console me [...] (11)

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<sup>48</sup> The term here refers to Hegelian synthesis.

To Kierkegaard paradox was important not because it simplified or made anything easier but for precisely the opposite reason—that “it is a hill up which we have to struggle”. God, then, was unreasonable simply because reason had no means of encapsulating or analyzing him. What a crime it must be, then, to posit a system of the universe or a cosmogony! Likely this is ultimately what is at the very root of Kierkegaard’s distrust and dislike of organised religion—that it translated mystery into reasoning’s and ethics.

The famous declaration he gave of this state of affairs in *Fear and Trembling* was that “our age is not willing to stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine; it goes further, it turns wine into water” (118). In a stunning stroke of irony, it was the sort of mythologisation of theology which, in the end, “ruined the sacred truths” by its demythologisation. It is in his *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) where Kierkegaard unleashes the fullness of his philosophical and rhetorical vitality. It was, in essence, a Declaration of Independence from the prevailing empire of philosophy and he was its Thomas Jefferson. Taking on the dignity of himself penning an introduction as the “future” Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard declares of his own work:

... this book was nothing less than a declaration of independence, not only from the reigning Hegelianism of S.K.’s time and locality, but also from the whole tradition of rationalistic, “systematic” thought which, with one or two significant interruptions, had held the stage in Europe for at least two centuries. (190)

This empire, then, was the same which the Victorian fantasists rebelled against and was remarkably metaphorically akin to the Roman Empire in its last days. It was divided into two realms, one of which was ruled by philosophy and the other theology, though both regimes were hapless and tensions ever divided the two. In Kierkegaard’s mind, the real fantasist was the philosopher which had “gradually come

to be so fantastic a being that scarcely the most extravagant fancy has ever invented anything so fabulous” (200).

Kierkegaard’s charge and claim was that philosophers had been made redundant not by industrialisation and the physical sciences, but by their own determination to be elite, abstract, removed and irrelevant towards normal human life:

As soon as it is remembered that philosophizing does not consist in addressing fantastic beings in fantastic language, but that those to whom the philosopher addresses himself are human beings; so that we have not to determine fantastically *in abstracto* whether a persistent striving is something lower than systematic finality, or vice versa, but that the question is what existing human beings, insofar as they are existing human beings, must needs be content with: then it will be evident that the ideal of a persistent striving is the only view of life that does not carry with it an inevitable disillusionment. (203)

The “persistent striving,” is in fact faith and not doubt. Of course, this principle is a theological one as well as philosophical. The truth requires “persistent striving” because it is paradoxical and therefore unable to be systematised, rationalised or legitimated. The truth is not paradoxical by its own nature but “by virtue of its relationship to an existing individual” (216). Therefore faith itself is not a place of permanence or assent to an eternal set of propositions but rather a process. Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is necessary in an incomplete existence which cannot be understood. It is the only way to approach it, and conversely it is the only thing that can thusly be approached. “For the absurd is the object of faith, and [thus] the only object that can be believed” (221).

If this postulate is true, then it follows that faith, wherever it happens, must contain equal risk or absurdity or else it is not, in fact, faith. Kierkegaard argues at length in *Philosophical Fragments* that it is impossible to have objective knowledge of Christianity’s truth (but neither of its untruth), but that this is what made it most important. What is known cannot be believed and Truth is a thing which, because it

is paradoxical, must be believed rather than known. “Truth,” he says, “is subjectivity” (191).

Therefore, if faith is the pursuit of paradoxical truth, then any process which claims to possess in entirety, finality and objectivity must be a ruse. “In a speculative-fantastic sense we have a positive finality in the System, and in an aesthetic-fantastic sense we have one in the fifth act of the drama. But this sort of finality is valid only for fantastic beings” (Kierkegaard 204). To believe, then, is not a fantasy. To “know” with objectivity and finality is possible only for “fantastic beings”. To believe entails risk all the same—“Without risk there is no faith” (214). Yet the risk in believing must be considerably less than that of knowing. For the believer has never claimed knowledge, so that he can not be proven wrong. He who “knows” God, however—this type characterising as many religious persons as nonreligious—risks everything in what must always be a losing bet.

Such a perspective also liberates faith from dogmatism, for this too codifies and finalises where such things are impossible. While he himself maintained the centrality of Christianity, it was never the precise object of faith which really made a difference for Kierkegaard (and here one might see again the result of encroaching doubts throughout the nineteenth century over the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment). What mattered most was a person’s seeking after truth and making himself subject to that truth. He states in a journal entry that “It is this divine side of man, his inward action, which means everything—not a mass of information” (5). Therefore, the body of knowledge in a person’s possession, should it comprise doctrines, theological arguments, or anything of the sort, is by far less substantial than the “inward action,” that is, the intellectual and spiritual pursuit of truth.

In a century where Christendom was preoccupied with the concerns of missionaries, the example Kierkegaard provides in *Philosophical Fragments* is apt:

If one who lives in the midst of Christianity goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays, but prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God although he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol. (212)

While stopping well short of MacDonald's universalism, Kierkegaard reiterates powerfully the extent to which faith must be differentiated from knowledge. The significance of this is that it qualifies the sort of risk taken in the act of belief itself, specifically the temporary literary/liturgical belief at the centre of this paper. For it means that content itself cannot be dangerous to an individual with a proper "inward action." There is never any danger in any text for the person of faith and "inward action." St. Paul says as much when he states "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world<sup>49</sup> or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (1 Co. 3:21-23). Neither was the idea unique to Paul. Jesus articulates the same idea by stating "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?" but rather, "What comes out of a man makes him unclean" (Mk. 7:18, 20).

There is no doubt as to why Kierkegaard remains to this day an archetypical existentialist. He rejected the objective wherever he found it, whether in "truth" or philosophy, faith or religion. His response to the Cartesian question was essentially to dismiss it as either unanswerable or unimportant. He avoided ultimate foundations as being every bit as unattainable as ultimate conclusions and posited a different way of existing within the paradigm of intellectual (and otherwise) existence: "What if,

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<sup>49</sup> Gk. κόσμος

instead of talking or dreaming about an absolute beginning, we talked about a leap” (200). By taking that leap he became the “master and way out of the league that the rest of us play in” (Fodor 17). Of course, his work doesn’t seem nearly so radical as it was in the nineteenth century, but this is because he influenced such a wide range of philosophers and theologians that his famous “way out” became in many ways and for many readers and students of philosophy a “way in.”

In terms of the project at hand, Kierkegaard’s work provides an excellent philosophical matrix which is then filled with the “stuff” of a hermeneutic of fantasy to at last produce a sort of spellcraft by which it again becomes possible to speak of belief, or to assert or even simply infer that which is “other” to the overarching, tyrannical metaphor and metanarrative of Enlightenment reason. The difference between the framework which Kierkegaard provides and one adopted from, for instance, a Post-Structuralist approach is the intentionally constructive, progressive function of Kierkegaard’s philosophy in contrast to the deconstructive and sometimes nihilistic methodology of the Post-Structuralists.

This Post-Structuralism begins, in one sense, with Nietzsche and his “genealogies.” So to speak of the Kierkegaardian “leap” is to respond not only to the totalising “positivist” effect of reason but also the negative force of deconstruction. To leap is to make the same movement as in the adoption of literary belief, although without the safety valve of that specific kind of belief’s characteristic temporal expiration. When Kierkegaard crosses the Rubicon, it is not an experiment, but an adventure. Because for him the world is so full of risk and uncertainty, it makes no sense at all to hold back. The present state is neither safe nor satisfactory for Kierkegaard, he seeks always to move forward. Therefore, he does not mark his trail with breadcrumbs because “home” is an eschatological, apocalyptic category, not an

origin and “self” a journey rather than a set of characteristics. He cannot be taken from his path because his path is itself the process rather than any intellectual “place.”

In this way the Kierkegaardian model demonstrates its potential for doing away with the risk of a literary/liturgical encounter altogether. Instead of temporarily exchanging one set of beliefs or assertions for another, with the somewhat frightening prospect of never being able to quite reclaim the ones which were set down in the beginning, ideas become catalysts for intellectual and spiritual evolution instead of some sort of internal possession or, even more drastically, definitive characteristics and identity markers. Because it is the general tendency for an individual to believe himself right in all things until he alters his position (a possibility rarely admitted, much less sought after or encouraged), believing otherwise becomes an automatically threatening prospect as it seems to threaten his treasured property or even his very selfhood. Yet Kierkegaard proves the Marx of the intellectual economy, problematising such conceptions of ownership and identity based on, essentially, the social stratification of ideas. Thoughts, notions, assertions, beliefs and (the most numinous category of them all) knowledge are not mental objects but functions of a process which result from faith, or objective uncertainty/paradox.

When Kierkegaard speaks of philosophers as “fantastic beings,” he speaks himself as a fantasist, employing the classic turn of metaphor in which that which is reasonable becomes absurd and the profoundly obvious, illusory. He himself becomes Anodos, who, even after returning from Fairy Land, yearns to return to the land which, for him, will forever be truer and more actual than the mundane. It is no wonder, then, that Kierkegaard, like most fantasists, remained peripheral and marginalised throughout his own lifetime. For him it was the finality of that which was posited as “real” or “reasonable” which rendered it, in the end, absolutely

untenable and ridiculous. In the same way as anything which claims mimesis is inevitably fictive (thus rendering realist fiction as the most truly fantastic of all literature), Kierkegaard saw all explanation or systematisation as patently unreasonable.<sup>50</sup> Thus he became to philosophy what George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll and their counterparts were to literature.

Despite his own admission that his scepticism was boundless and all-consuming, Kierkegaard can never be for many the definitive Post-Enlightenment sceptic nor eminently qualified because of his (albeit non-traditional) commitment to the public expression of specifically Christian faith. Thus, it becomes quite facile to become sceptical and consequently dismissive of Kierkegaard as an individual solely interested in the legitimisation of personal sentiment. Undoubtedly, there is far too much force and vigour to his work for it succumb to such mild attempts at reductionism. Yet, if the Victorian fantasists are to be contextualised philosophically, Kierkegaard alone simply will not do. To understand what someone like MacDonald is doing in his fantasy literature, it is necessary to consider a more British tradition.

### **An Unexpected Fantasist**

If one is to understand the philosophical roots of Victorian British fantasy literature, it is essential to move back in time from that period in order to discover the controversial, enigmatic father of Post-Enlightenment British scepticism, David Hume. Indeed, while Hume might seem an unnatural choice to link to an evangelical like MacDonald or Kingsley, they have much more congruence than first appearances might indicate. Why Hume has been passed down through the ages as a champion of atheism, whether through an unwillingness to associate scepticism with any religious

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<sup>50</sup> In this way it is perhaps Kuhn who becomes the most excellent contemporary heir to Kierkegaardian tradition.

perspective other than agnosticism or atheism, or a transmission of the somewhat overstated charges levelled against him by his contemporaries without respect to his thoroughgoing responses to them, or a simple revisionism it cannot be determined or resolved. Yet the internal evidence of some of his most prominent writings (and even more so in private correspondence) clearly and consistently places Hume as a theist.

While it is an interesting reading of Hume to regard these statements as an ironic cover for bitter inward atheism, the reading's foundation on the argument that Hume was forced to be a theist by social and professional constraints simply does not hold. For if Hume was in the habit of editing his philosophy or beliefs for the sake of professional advancement, he did so with remarkable inconsistency and incompetence. Instead, he persistently combated the idea that he was an atheist or sought to undermine Christian faith even on occasions which he had nothing particular to gain from his dissent. Most notable among these, perhaps, is his "A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh" (1728) which was undertaken after, not before, he was rejected for professorship when there was little to no hope of ever reversing the faculty's decision. Hume was unarguably at odds with many of the institutional theologians of his day, but the conflict always had more to do with his objections to Thomism than opposition to faith itself. In the same way, he was supremely critical also of the claims and epistemologies of his contemporary philosophers, even fellow sceptics.

What binds Hume together with Kierkegaard and the Victorian fantasists is his relentless attack on both the reason and epistemology which was being developed around him throughout the Enlightenment. He sought not to dismantle what he calls common reason or indeed even the philosophical or theological endeavour, rather to moderate the claims of his peers in these fields:

As to the Scepticism with which the Author is charged, I must observe, that the Doctrine of the Pyrrhonians or Sceptics have been regarded in all Ages as Principles of mere Curiosity, or a Kind of Jeux d'esprit, without any Influence on a Man's steady Principles or Conduct in Life. In Reality, a Philosopher who affects to doubt the Maxims of common Reason, and even of his Senses, declares sufficiently that he is not in earnest, and that he intends not to advance an Opinion which he would recommend as Standards of Judgment and Action. All he means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of mere human Reasoners, by showing them, that even with regard to Principles which seem the clearest, and which they are necessitated from the strongest Instincts of Nature to embrace, they are not able to attain a full Consistence and absolute Certainty. Modesty then, and Humility, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of Scepticism; not a universal Doubt, which is impossible for any Man to support, and the first and most trivial Accident in Life must immediately disconcert and destroy. ("Letter" 116)

To Hume, scepticism was nothing more than a tool with which to examine the popular doctrines of the day, not entirely unlike the role of deconstruction in Derrida. It is here, in correspondences like the one sent to the Lord Provost, John Couotts, that the student of Hume gains critical insight into just the sort of thing he was really trying to accomplish in his philosophical writing. Opinions which declare the letter a "gloss" fail to recognise the import of Hume breaking his customary silence with regards to his own work and the unequivocal nature of his self-defence. It was his own pride and sense of dignity which typically kept him from responding to what he must have seen as petty and misguided criticism. Therefore, it would be absolutely absurd if, for the sake of that dignity or some other sentiment, he broke the silence only to trivialise his own work! It must be the case, then, that Hume wrote material like the "Letter" in earnest, otherwise it is utterly unaccountable. To dismiss it all as sarcasm or self-service would be the real gloss.

Because Hume wrote as a contemporary to the Enlightenment, he of course had no cause to react to the startling division it would reap between theology and philosophy and even more so the sciences. The problem to Hume was that at that

point theology did not yet know that its relationship with philosophy and “pure reason” had been ruptured. Theologians wanted to hold on to the Aquinas who said that God could be deduced while ignoring the Aquinas who disparaged the ability of reason alone as the mechanism of theology and of knowing God, even its potential to know God. What Hume did, essentially, was to recognise the inherent and historic problem that “pure reason” presents to theologians (and also, in a related manner, to philosophers):

In Reality, whence come all the various Tribes of Heretics, the Arians, Socinians and Deists, but from too great a Confidence in mere human Reason, which they regard as the Standard of every Thing, and which they will not submit to the superior Light of Revelation? (“Letter” 117)

Hume discovers the very same experience undergone by Milton and MacDonald, finding that entirely reasonable theology is inevitably heretical theology. Whenever the paradox, the true “faith” of Kierkegaard’s later objective uncertainty, is eliminated, so too is banished the orthodox faith of historical, Biblical Christianity. The Thomism of that time had more in common with St. Thomas the Doubter, who needed to see, touch and *know* the resurrection, than St. Thomas Aquinas.

Hume, like Kierkegaard, considered subjectivity and belief as things to be embraced rather than shunned. For belief, belief in the evidence of the senses and sentiments, was the very core of Hume’s epistemology. To him anything which purported to be knowledge began with belief, such that religious beliefs were held on the same terms as other much more mundane assertions:

And must not a Man be ridiculous to assert that our Author denies the Principles of Religion, when he looks upon them as equally certain with the Objects of his Senses? If I be as much assured of these Principles, as that this Table at which I now write is before me; Can any Thing further be desired by the most rigorous Antagonist? (“Letter” 117)

Now, in order to contextualise such a statement in Hume, one must enact one of two choices. Either he must make and support the claim that in it Hume is somehow lying without restraint, a notion which has already been dealt with and dismissed, or he must use it to enlighten Hume's other statements on the nature and foundation of belief.

Hume appears at his most adversarial with regards to religion when he confronts the use of miracles in support of the veracity of religion. He cites the weight of evidence against miracles as the entire weight of human experience which is regarded as non-miraculous to say of them what was already known, that they are impossible:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (*Enquiry* 76)

Hume goes further by establishing the weight of the many false miracles of history, but makes the categorical error of assigning all miracle events to this designation. He has demonstrated the prevalence of false miracles, but it is of course a non sequitur to assume that all miracle events must be the same.

Yet it is important to realise that the real object of Hume's criticism here are not the miracles of Christian tradition but the way in which the Church used them as justification of its belief while ignoring and dismissing the similar claims of all other world religions. He not only problematised this way of reasoning, but openly mocks the method of employment by associating those he calls the "dangerous friends or disguised enemies of the *Christian Religion*" with the very parties who they themselves scorn mercilessly: "when we believe any miracle of Mahomet or his successors, we have for our warrant the testimony of a few barbarous Arabians" (*Enquiry* 89, 81-82). He undertakes his argument, he says, solely to "confound" such

persons and their hazardous influence on faith. “Our most holy religion,” Hume states, “is founded on *Faith*, not reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure” (89).

In support of this claim, he beckons the examination of the Pentateuchal miracles, “not as the word or testimony of God himself, but as the production of a mere writer or historian” (*Enquiry* 90). This could, perhaps, be called Hume’s own unique wager—that if the weight of divine revelation lies on the holy scriptures, then its miracles do not need the validation of any number of witnesses and to pretend to such would lessen, not strengthen, their weight. From this perspective, it would be cheap and ludicrous to say “I believe in the resurrection because of the character of St. Mark and the other witnesses who observed it.” To Hume, no number of witnesses of a miracle has ever been assembled so as to legitimate its claims historically. In contrast, it would be much more preferable to assert the resurrection on the basis of faith, because this does not need to be reasonable. It is a claim which reason cannot touch, affect, or speak of much less dismiss. This is a claim which he does not rely solely on his sceptic criticism to propagate, but he even enlists the authority of his ecclesial predecessors. “All of the ancient Fathers, as well as our first Reformers, are copious in representing the Weakness and Uncertainty of mere human Reason”<sup>51</sup> (“Letter” 117).

It should begin to become clear at this point why Hume has been chosen as the person to contextualise the Victorian fantasists’ reaction to the Enlightenment. He was the intellectual foundation on which the fantasists wrote, always chipping away at the magnificent claim of philosophers and theologians and, in so doing, usurping the

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<sup>51</sup> Herein it is very possible to discern a subtle, though caustic, reference to that period’s mutilation and misuse of Aquinas. Of course, there is nothing to mark this as implicit, but it certainly works as a hypothetical.

throne of reason and exposing its claims to royalty as being as spurious as Henry Tudor's. He did not go so far in terms of constructing a positive alternative to the perspective he so doggedly criticised, but this is mainly because there was so much criticism to be done in his lifetime. The influence of Kant, who himself was awakened from "dogmatic slumber" by Hume's relentless critiques,<sup>52</sup> undoubtedly made it much more feasible for someone like Kierkegaard to develop something constructive and progressive out of the Kantian remnants leftover after the meadow of his thought and critique had been thoroughly ploughed by Hegel. Indirectly, it is Hume who makes possible Kant, Kierkegaard and the Victorian fantasists. In this way, he may rightly deserve to be called a Romantic in his own, peculiar right.

To speak of Hume as a Romantic or even someone who in an obscure way paved the road for later fantasists begs the question of his perspective on imagination and belief. Imagination was as powerful of a concept to Hume as it would become for the poets who exemplify the term "Romantic" a generation after him. For him, like his poetic successors, the concept of imagination was also closely linked to one of belief. In a thinker as thoroughly sceptical as Hume, one would expect to find, however, a rigorous and rigid distinction between things imagined and things believed. However, actuality confounds this expectation to a great degree, for the explanation of their relationship in Hume is much more intangible, idiosyncratic:

Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision [...] Wherein, therefore, consists the difference between such a fiction and belief? [...] the difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature, like all other sentiments [...] (*Enquiry* 31)

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<sup>52</sup> See Guyer, p. 35.

In reality, Hume sees no firm and unmovable wall or barrier between imagination and belief, only a very subjective “sentiment” which is entirely outside of the scope of the will’s influence. All the same, imagination is pictured as being entire orders of magnitude less important than actual belief—“belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain” (32). Although little separates the two, in function they are almost entirely different:

And in philosophy, we can go no farther than assert, that *belief* is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination. It gives them more weight and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; enforces them in the mind; and renders them the governing principle of our actions. (32)

So, of course, the difference between imagination and belief is very important even if that which separates them is very little.

Again, to return to the literary subject at hand, this would place the risk of hermeneutical imagination, which entails that subtle, literary belief, in the fact that, according to one’s own nature and sentiment, it could involuntarily create a much more firm and lasting belief which could thereafter scarcely be abandoned. Within the Humean sense, though, this is both hardly and cataclysmically problematic. It is cataclysmically problematic because it is the imagination which allows interface with thought and experience. It is at the same time hardly problematic because the risk is that of existence, the one already undertaken in every moment of every day. Thus its difficulty becomes so great as to require a “leap,” but one which humans are demonstrably capable of and are comfortable making.

Hume also is no absurdist. He moderates his claims to the point where imagination does not need to be either radical or nearly so frightening. For, in him at

least, the familiar and the sensible are that which govern the sentiment of belief such that belief ought to be based on firm experience. He provides this example:

I hear at present, for instance, a person's voice, with whom I am acquainted; and the sound comes as from the next room. This impression of my senses immediately conveys my thought to the person, together with all the surrounding objects. I paint them out to myself as existing at present, with the same qualities and relations, of which I formerly knew them possessed. These ideas take faster hold of my mind, than ideas of an enchanted castle. They are very different to the feeling, and have much greater influence of every kind, either to give pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow. (*Enquiry* 32-33)

It is because one *knows* or in some other way identifies closely with an idea that it excites his imagination into belief, while that which is entirely unfamiliar to him, through every fibre of his being, will doubtless receive much less esteem. Yet the point of the enchanted castle in the sort of fantasy which this thesis has been concerned with is not that it is entirely unfamiliar, but that although it is entirely alien it still manages to be shockingly evocative by delving deep into those feelings and ideas which, though deeply embedded in the reader's person, are nevertheless suppressed or forgotten.

So even as Hume labours to mediate the "danger" of his intrinsically subjective and, after all, greatly *a priori* epistemology of belief, he yet cannot fool the close observers. His guarantees are more like hastily prepared balms and snake oil ointments which cannot disguise the fact his system must always be an intensely personal one, that throughout pieces such as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* a great proportion of the evidences are highly individualised anecdotes which may bear little or no weight for any reader other than Hume himself. Yet, whereas this aspect of his writing might have been an embarrassment to him earlier in his career, by the time he finished his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in

1776, the year of his death, after a quarter of a century working on it, it was clear that he had embraced the *humanity* of his discipline and its discourses.

Despite the massive intellectual contributions of his other works, it is the sheer *literary* weight of his *Dialogues* which qualify it as his unique masterpiece of writing. There are, it may be argued, other places in which his thought is more original, vigorous, or profound. But none of these may carry affective weight of *Dialogues*. While taking the appearance of a classical philosophical dialogue, the work is truly character driven. What it is *about* is much less the subject of discussion and much more about the way it is being discussed. It is, in that sense, a real dialogue. Its three protagonists scoff, dismiss, label, insult and walk out on each other. There is no objectivity to be found anywhere. The character, Philo, who dominates the conversation and, as some claim, represents most closely Hume's own view does not actually come out the winner of the argument, per the declaration of its narrator, Pamphilus. The orthodox theist, Demea, storms out half way through the discussion never to return. The empirical theist, Cleanthes, is unable to withstand or respond to the sometimes baffling scepticism espoused by his friend, Philo, and yet calmly maintains that he would not be held hostage by such rhetorical shock tactics which he deemed empty and not a little trite.

Upon first reading, *Dialogues* seems to be a confounding mess. It continues to confound critics who are thwarted by wanting to elevate Philo, while Hume himself favoured Cleanthes and the Demea, the weakest of the three, often quotes more or less directly from Hume's other works in support of his own view. Perhaps the difficulty here arises from reading *Dialogues* too much as a philosophical tract trying to prove or state something along those lines instead of more in terms of what it actually is, which is literature. It is not necessary to identify one of the characters with Hume as

they all reflect aspects of himself in one way or another. Instead of weighing and measuring the force of their arguments, one must first take on the task of evaluating how these characters are actually acting towards one another, for their philosophy is closely tied to their overall demeanour.

Many attempts to explain away the awkward tension which is the be all and end all of *Dialogues* have been proffered and have subsequently fallen short. For instance, the argument that Hume somehow, passive-aggressively mocked theistic believe by causing an extended debate on his existence which, if actual, should have been so obvious that debate concerning it could be nothing less than insulting (*Dialogues* xxxix). What, then, of the persistent silence of Cleanthes in the face of the extended, impassioned orations? What of his stubborn persistent faith which he refused to rebuff his opponent with on every point, but rather kept more often his peace, content to, if anything, remonstrate his friend's poor form. What also can one do with Cleanthes's employment of Hume's own system of believing, one of the individual natural sentiment acting upon the imagination?

Cleanthes begs Philo to consider the wonders of the natural world and says "tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation" (31). Of course, at first glance one might wish to dismiss this as incongruous with Hume's persistent critique of the argument from design. But, again, one must look at the nuance of Cleanthes' statement and the argument from design. The argument claims that one may deduce the existence of a creator from the existing world. Cleanthes says that the witness is not a rational one, but an emotional one. The idea impresses the mind so powerfully as to be a sensation, an experience, which is directly representative of Hume's characterisation of the epistemological grounds of belief. In the end, it is Philo who is

made to look more the fool by his wild orations and boundless, warrantless disregard for either common logic or sensation. Cleanthes criticises Philo thusly:

The declared profession of every reasonable sceptic is only to reject abstruse, remote, and refined arguments; to adhere to common sense and the plain instincts of nature; and to assent, *wherever any reasons strike him with so full a force, that he cannot, without the greatest violence, prevent it.* Now the arguments for natural religion are plainly of this kind; and nothing but the most perverse, obstinate metaphysics can reject them. (31, emphasis added)

The force of this statement is the degree to which it is directly linked to Hume himself. It mimics not only his consistently rehearsed views on the role of scepticism but also the nature of belief. The argument that Hume intends to make a mockery of Cleanthes by forcing him to defend that which is beyond defence loses weight when one realises that in order to do so Hume would have had to mock himself in the process.

It is necessary to come to terms with the very human, very “fleshly” nature of Hume’s *Dialogues*. Dorothy Coleman does so in her introduction by noting the fluidity of the argument and the plurality of readings which it tends to produce. As such, she argues, rather anachronistically, that Hume’s true purpose was to relativise the terms of the argument and thus emphasise and encourage a sort of modern liberal concept of creedal toleration. Yet, if this was Hume’s intent, then why should he have his narrator, at the end of the script, intervene and declare one conversant better than another? Why should Cleanthes come out the winner both in terms of philosophy (what the narrator calls his “accurate philosophical turn”) and in terms of individual character? For time and again Philo is made to be embarrassed for his excesses, his careless, destructive methods and his overall unsporting manner.

Cleanthes remonstrates him:

You can trace causes from effects: You can compare the most distant and remote objects: And your greatest errors proceed not from

barrenness of thought and invention, but from too luxuriant a fertility, which suppresses your natural good sense, by a profusion of unnecessary scruples and objections. (*Dialogues* 32)

At this rebuff, “Philo was a little embarrassed and confounded” (33). In terms of narrative, Hume could only make his judgments concerning his characters more obvious if he, like Shakespeare, introduced Oberon to turn Philo’s head into that of an ass.

There is nothing clean about the *Dialogues*. There is no neat and tidy message which can sum up its intricacies. There is no real methodology to its debates other than the organic texture of human conversation. Its point of conclusion is not a logical one, nor is all of its discourse measured and logical. As a whole, it seems too slovenly to be associated with the normally rigorous and meticulous Hume. Even so, it is full of wise insight, the sort of experience built of a lifetime of philosophical discussion and investigation. The foremost hero, Cleanthes, says less about Natural Religion or philosophy than he does about his peers. He addresses them as individuals instead of as figures for their individual systems of thought. He does not talk to an orthodox theist and a Pyrrhonist sceptic, he talks to Demea and Philo.

What presents itself from a comparison of Hume and Kierkegaard is not just the way in which both of them resisted the totalising effect of the Enlightenment’s reasoning.<sup>53</sup> But if one considers the way in which both chose to confront that edifice and the sort of accusations they levelled against it, that will serve as a beginning point. It is the foolish pride of the system which seems to draw the particular ire of Hume and Kierkegaard. Were their opponents simply wrong it is certain that the usual sort of academic disputation would have arisen. But it is the arrogance of the error which leads Kierkegaard to call philosophers “fantastic.” Similarly, it is the

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<sup>53</sup> It is clear that Hegel, Kierkegaard’s primary ideological opponent, was much more in the trend of the Enlightenment than he was a true Kantian.

sheer hubris of the philosophical theology which Hume was opposed to in constructing with reason a system for understanding God—as much a shamble as the tower of Babel if it were made out of rusty Soviet scaffolding. His narrator concludes *Dialogues* with this cutting remark:

While the haughty dogmatist, persuaded, that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy, disdains any farther aid, and rejects this adventitious instructor. To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian. (102)

For both Hume and Kierkegaard, knowing prevents believing. It is impossible to have faith in something which is known, or which appears to be known. While history clearly remembers Kierkegaard as a Christian, Hume's religious conviction is largely in doubt. Yet this is due only to the fact that he combats the ideas of his contemporaries on how God can be known. For those who cannot see past such a fraudulent theology, Hume will of course become an atheist and all his statements to the contrary magically will be transformed into sarcasms and ironies.

This, then, brings even closer the true and telling relationship between these two philosophers. For the fact that Kierkegaard might be dismissed as an authority on the subject of epistemology and belief because of his faith and that Hume might be more trustworthy (even if being misread) because he has been largely revised into an atheist, speaks to the fact that of all things which humanity regularly grapples with, belief is one of the hardest, perhaps the hardest to begin to be objective about. Belief, it seems—at least in Kierkegaard and Hume—is a very human subject, almost entirely inseparable from the individual, and is spoken of in very human ways and in individual terms.

### Cardinal Newman and Life Fantastic

Still, there is a spanner to be thrown into the proverbial works of this perhaps slightly sentimental argument. That spanner comes in the form of the preeminent Victorian voice on knowing and belief, Cardinal John Henry Newman and his magnum opus, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). Newman's famous project was to undertake a philosophical defence of the act of believing something which cannot be understood. He came to this strange, alien body of belief and dissected it as though a surgeon who had been familiarising himself with the procedure for his entire life. Indeed, the chronological exaggeration here is minimal: Newman worked on his masterpiece for twenty years in the golden age of his life. Yet there is a tension in the text which is very clear to see. It begins with the intense personal motivation which Newman brings to his project.

There is deep insecurity in his writing, brought on no doubt by the scores of friends and associates who, for reasons of either theological scepticism or agnosticism or out of devoted, level-headed Anglicanism, regarded his, now iconic, turn to Catholicism as folly. Newman's work, then, needed to go further in its claims than Hume or Kierkegaard even had a notion towards. He took it upon himself to defend not just belief, not just faith in God, not even a broad Christian Theism but a precise and dogmatic Roman Catholicism which had been commonly regarded as superstitious nonsense in England for centuries. This is the weak point in *Grammar of Assent*, it is the seam which tentatively holds the whole piece together and also the junction which must be breached in order to truly unravel the inner nature of the work.

Without a way in, readers of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* would be rendered as Joshua and his men circling aimlessly around Jericho blowing their

trumpets every so often—without divine intervention there would be no resolution to the stalemate. With only a title page by way introduction, Newman begins by launching into his description of the three types of proposition (interrogative, conditional and categorical) and their corresponding acts of enunciation which are doubt, inference and assent (9-10). From the start it becomes quite apparent that Newman meant his title quite literally. He developed a system for thinking about belief based on a (ultimately be a highly idiosyncratic) grammatical analysis of how belief was spoken about at the time. Undoubtedly the perceived relationship between language, ideas and objects is much more complex today<sup>54</sup> and using contemporary debates as a method of criticism for Newman's proves reductive. However, the one charge that bears credibility with reference to Newman's use of language is idiom. As it is, the *Grammar of Assent* is locked in the nineteenth century by its own relationship to its language.

For Newman this means that his achievement is somewhat less than what he likely thought it to be. For this project it means an important footnote in the legacy of the greatest British theologian of his era. The problem with this is that, as much as Newman endeavoured to look objectively, precisely and systematically at belief, his achievements will always be mired (or enhanced?) by the prevailing subjectivity in them. In almost every case he supports his arguments based on human experience but then often draws strange lines of distinction between the behaviour and some idea behind it. He makes the example of a child who asks his mother a question and receives an answer which he apprehends, but cannot understand because it depends on very technical knowledge. This is the early way in which Newman demonstrates that

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<sup>54</sup> Which is not to eliminate the significance of the questions it posed to the Victorians. Indeed, nominalism was one of the most frequent charges made against Newman by his Scholastic critics.

even that which cannot be understood can be believed and sometimes ought be believed. However, even though his goal is to examine phenomena such as these to determine if they are defensible or legitimate, he says of the boy and his mother:

Of course I am speaking of assent itself, and its intrinsic conditions, not the ground or motive of it. Whether there is an obligation upon the child to trust his mother, or whether there are cases where such trust is impossible, are irrelevant questions, and I notice them in order to put them aside. (Newman 18)

Yet it must be the case that an intrinsic condition of that assent is inseparable from its motive, the trust and authority, or the *credit* as Newman would say, of the mother with relation to the son. He notices it in order to dismiss it, he says, but on what grounds has it been dismissed? Without dismissal, the relation works out problematically for Newman's usage of the anecdote. What is being believed or assented to, the statement of explanation or the proposition "Mother is credible and authoritative and her assertions can safely be believed"?

Part of the lasting value of Newman's contribution to this field of thought on epistemology and belief is the rigorous way in which he defines his terms (it was a grammar, after all!) and the consistency with which he maintains those definitions. No writer on the subject since has so thoroughly set about his work as Newman. However, where there is introduced an element of unpredictable, wherever difficult human behaviour inserts itself, there Cardinal Newman begins to unravel. Compounding this is the fact that many times the behaviour is his own. Whether it is because of an attempt to rationalise the Trinity or take rhetorical swipes at colleagues who had refused to follow him on his Roman journey, the human peeks through time and again in what would otherwise be just the very sort of thing that would attract the scorn of Hume or Kierkegaard.

Furthermore, the point of including Cardinal Newman was not to use his work as an artificial opponent to the two previously highlighted philosophers, but rather to show just how potent his argument could be when it cracked under the stress of its subjectivity<sup>55</sup>. Backed into a corner over the potential epistemic weight of the beliefs he so dearly held, Cardinal Newman makes relative the value of assertions based on inference in comparison to those relating to authority:

Not only authority, but Inference also may impose on us assents which in themselves are little better than assertions, and which, so far as they are assents, can only be notional assents, as being assents, not to propositions inferred, but to the truth of those propositions... This leads me to the question, whether belief in a mystery can be more than an assertion. I consider it can be an assent, and my reasons for so are as follows:—A mystery is a proposition conveying incompatible notions, or is a statement of the inconceivable. Now we can assent to propositions (and a mystery is a proposition), provided we can apprehend them; therefore we can assent to a mystery, for, unless we in some sense apprehend it, we should not recognise it to be a mystery, that is, a statement uniting incompatible notions. (36)

It is impossible to say whether Cardinal Newman would have ever reached such views on epistemology, reason and belief had not he first endeavoured, like Milton and so many of the writers which have been examined after him, to defend the reasonability of both faith and the *Faith*.

Indeed, once the tide of criticism got started in *Grammar* it could hardly be stopped. “Logicians,” he quips at one point, “are more set on concluding rightly than on right conclusions” (66). The language intensifies even further as belief itself is approached. Literary leagues away from the sparse, cold, barren beginning of his work, consider Newman’s description of simple, natural belief as “credence”:

Credence is the means by which, in high and low, in the man of the world and in the recluse, our bare and barren nature is overrun and diversified from without with rich and living clothing. It is by such ungrudging, prompt assents to what is offered to us so lavishly, that we

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<sup>55</sup> This is not entirely unrelated to the “weak theology” of Caputo or Vattimo.

become possessed of the principles, doctrines, sentiments, facts, which constitute useful, and especially liberal knowledge. (41)

The concept of credence, here, is very close in a way to Kierkegaard's leap. In the least, they perform essentially the same function. Whereas Kierkegaard approaches what is essentially the problem of being and the senses with trepidation and, in turn, a sort of Byronic courage, Cardinal Newman regards this plain, "ungrudging" belief in the mundane commonalities of life as some thing extraordinarily beautiful—the "rich and living clothing" of existence.

What exists in the striking tension of *Grammar of Assent* is perhaps a stroke of literary beauty and genius. For the very language, the same which consigns the reasoning of his thesis to having less range of influence than it probably was intended to have, disdains the rational by mimicking what Newman largely considered it to be: cold, detached, unemotional, inhuman. In contrast, the language for such a small, common belief or assent as "The sky is blue and I see it" is absolutely euphoric, considering its source. It was belief which Newman thought to be at the centre of a person's psychological, spiritual and physical being and why belief has so much power to change people whereas reason has so little. On this point it is worth quoting the Cardinal at some length:

This is why science has so little of a religious tendency; deductions have no power of persuasion. The heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion... After all, man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal... Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof... Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith. (*Grammar* 65-67)

Here, at last, it can be seen that Newman's thought is not actually in opposition to Hume or Kierkegaard. For when Newman declares "man is *not* a reasoning animal" he echoes the insight Hume put forward in indicating that belief will always be a matter of *sense* or *feeling* because, at the end of the day, that is actually more important to most humans than what they think they know.<sup>56</sup> What an individual is able to infer and deduce about reality will scarcely be given privilege over what he feels about it. This is indeed what makes man more than machinery. It is what creates beauty in the human world and in our relationships with one another. It is, of course, the flaw of logic which the perfectly rational Spock cannot comprehend when Captain Kirk risks life, ship and crew to bring him back from oblivion telling him that sometimes the needs of the few outweigh those of the many.<sup>57</sup>

The binding force behind this dissertation which brings all of these various forces and writings together is humanism. What Blake, Milton, Rowling, MacDonald, Kierkegaard and the others, even Captain Kirk, all have in common is that they are great humanists. Or, if that term is perhaps too loaded, they can all be deemed as iconic champions of humanity.<sup>58</sup> They are not united by a school of thought, ideological or religious background, time period, genre or any other denominator excepting their determination to resist the dehumanising effects of "pure reason." They perform the same role as the poets and artists of Soviet gulags. They scribble their lines in spray paint on the Berlin Wall. Not only does the power of their words strike at the very heart of the edifice which confines them, but when they finally manage to "tear down this wall," beauty remains and not just void.

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<sup>56</sup> "But as it is impossible, that this faculty of imagination can ever, of itself, reach belief, it is evident, that belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind" (*Enquiry* 32).

<sup>57</sup> From *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (Paramount Pictures, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> Kirk, after all, saves the entire human race on many occasions.

At present, it is common to speak of reason as that ethereal force which bears the potential to free humanity from the chronic cycle of self-harm which (presumably) results from religious dogma. Without wishing to deny the role of religion in human violence through history nor resorting to the argument which compares it to the violence of patently anti-religious communist and fascist political movements, it appears unlikely that reason, itself a convention of mankind rather than an intrinsic attribute of it, can serve as the protector and preserver of humanity, for reason itself cannot grasp what humanity actually is. Reason can only regard humanity as a race among other races within a biosphere. Therefore, it seems unlikely that reason alone can provide a better human future. If the human future is to be dictated by reason, then poetry will meet its end.

The list of thinkers, poets novelists and others who share the cause championed by Hume, Newman and Kierkegaard in this chapter is wide and diverse over countries, continents and centuries. It would be pure folly to ignore from their ranks Pascal and his influence on the school of existentialism and also eventually widely influential in British philosophical and theological thought. First published in English in 1688, Pascal's classic collection of *Pensées* was first employed primarily for its apparently logical wager rather than its wholesale rejection of the privileging of reason in matters of faith (Daston 61-62). It took an Anglo-French surgeon, seeing the inadequacies of earlier translations, to revitalise *Pensées* at a very significant time in English intellectual development—the throes of Romanticism. There is a perceptible shift during this period towards emphasising more within Pascal's fragmentary text than just his rhetorical wager. For Pascal penned a statement which was something of a battle cry for the Romantic cause, that "The heart knows reasons

of which reason knows nothing,” and that surely “It is the heart that perceives God and not the reason” (127).

This is ultimately the resounding critique which has been made against reason, that it, like any tyrant, oversteps its bounds. The source of all of the much-heralded conflict between faith and reason is that in every case one has overstepped its mark and claimed to be able to do something which only the other is capable of. Pascal describes the conflict succinctly:

Let them at least learn what this religion is which they are attacking before attacking it. If this religion boasted that it had a clear sight of God and plain and manifest evidence of his existence, it would be an effective objection to say that there is nothing to be seen in the world which probes him so obviously. But since on the contrary it says that men are in darkness and remote from God [...] then what advantage can they derive when, unconcerned to seek the truth as they profess to be, they protest that nothing shows it to them? (127-128)

The dialogue between theology and rational philosophy after the Enlightenment was problematised by the fact that the two had begun to use different languages, or that the meanings of all the most important words had changed without one of the parties realising it. The most intense difficulty, as it was perceived by Hume especially, was that some theologian endeavoured to carry on speaking in a totalising, rational way about a God who could not possibly be such. So, perhaps, the argument which Pascal reprimands for missing the point became a valid one when theology elected to reject the language of mystery by and large in favour of a systematic, mechanical divinity.

Fantasy echoes the existentialist philosophical tradition which has been briefly engaged in this chapter. Though it would seem that fantasy represents anything but actual experience, this sees only a very small part of what fantasy of the tradition which has been described thus far is doing. For this fantasy is that which describes the experiences for which literature has lost language for describing—lost to psychology and all manner of other reductionisms. This fantasy relates the journey of

the heart, of sentiment, or faith or whichever one of the many terms which has been used to describe that portion of human *being* which no longer fits into the very narrow system of rational explanation. It speaks about the power of belief and is itself empowered by its creation of belief, no matter how temporary or numinous.

It also is inherently infused with risk. Indeed, existentialism itself is shot through with risk, the risks of living in a world full of danger. But the perspective of the existential/fantastic critique of Enlightenment reason is that it is not safe either. Just like the unpredictability and instability of human existence forced Cardinal Newman from a very rational diatribe on belief into a subjective, existential and sentimental expression of faith, the same instabilities and phenomena interfere with human attempts to construct and enact rational ways of thinking and being. Of course there is danger in the seductive narratives of fantasy, but danger lies everywhere and with every narrative in which one might choose to participate or identify/interpret himself, including reason.

The objection renews itself, however: “fantasy is not *real*”. Yet if experience can in general be deemed “real”, then here is fantasy’s foundation. For in its narratives the reader identifies its contents with his own experience and, as is often the case, especially in the very liturgical and participative literature which has been examined thus far, experiences them again. Indeed, as C.G. Prado writes, “One natural response to the philosophical root issue of the failure of fiction to be about something real, is to say that while individual sentences may fail to refer, novels as wholes manage to be about the world or the human condition” (9). The “fantasy” of fantasy literature is like the hypothesis of scientific thought. Before anything which is deemed “scientific” can be such, it must have a notional, propositional, *imaginary* basis in hypothesis. Only through experimentation, the experiential, can that

hypothesis become actualised. In the same way, the mechanism of a fantasy or fantastic narrative is like a hypothesis which becomes actual when engaged and experienced by the reader. In science, it is a temporary belief in the possibility of the hypothesis which allows for an experimental mechanism to be developed, put in place and executed. Insofar as actual beliefs towards the positive or contrary of the hypothesis are involved in the construction of the mechanism, the science and the actuality of its result will be flawed. In literature, it is a temporary belief which includes the suspension of disbelief that allows the reader to experience the text and the fantasy itself whereas its reality hinges on whether or not it inspires Humean belief—that which is struck upon the senses so forcibly that to doubt its actuality would be to reject the entire stream of sense and experience.

In the same way, what a hypothesis is to experimentation and what fantasy is to the experience of reading and identification theology is to its implementation: religion. Newman states, “Theology, as such, always is notional, as being scientific: religion, as being personal, should be real” (42). Religion<sup>59</sup> is real in Newman because it actualises the theological in experience itself. Whereas it is very easy to discuss whether or not God (if God should exist) might be the sort of being who was interested in or willing to “talk” to human beings, debating among several propositions, it is intensely difficult to dispute or affirm another person’s assertion that he experienced God through prayer (just as it would be difficult for one to deny such if he himself regularly experienced God in prayer):

In religious inquiry each of us can speak only for himself, and for himself he has a right to speak. His own experiences are enough for himself, but he cannot speak for others: he cannot lay down the law; he can only bring his own experiences to the common stock of psychological facts. He knows what has satisfied and satisfies himself; if it satisfies him, it is likely to satisfy others; if, as he believes and is

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<sup>59</sup> Religion not as an institution but as a way of being influenced by theological belief.

sure, it is true, it will approve itself to others also, for there is but one truth. (Newman 384)

There is nothing intrinsically risky about considering propositions in any context, nor should there be risk in listening to or expressing experience. Yet where a hypothesis, innocuous in its own notional form, may be proven; where a fiction might be read, identified and believed;<sup>60</sup> where a theological assertion may become *liturgia* and transform itself into faith, there lies risk. The risk exists according to the principle that beliefs are intellectual possessions which shape one's character and existence. Yet when this principle is nullified by a Kierkegaardian "objective uncertainty" it has been seen that the risk also dissipates.

However, it cannot be true that science, literature and theology, although they have been for a moment made analogous, are the same. Science, for instance, is limited in the experiences it can create and the belief it can generate by the incapacity of reason to understand all kinds of experience itself and the human inability to create functional tests and causal links in response to all of its questions. That which cannot be tested by science or reliably deduced by reason, then, must belong to the sphere of fantasy and theology. Now then, imagine what the reaction might be if an objection were raised to a particular field or incidence of experimentation not on the grounds that its methods were unethical but because the experience it sought to create was itself too "dangerous." If, for instance, a mission to Mars was cancelled for fear of the experience (and subsequent actualisation) of alien life, there would be a massive protest not only from those involved with that particular scientific field, but for a vast majority of the public as well. The idea is that one cannot fear his own world and experiencing it, and indeed should not prevent others from it. To do so would not just be ignorant and phobic, but also irresponsible.

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<sup>60</sup> Again, this is in the Humean sense.

In the same way it is impossible to say that the “risk” of literary or theological engagement is debilitating and preventative. To reject engagement with a theological principle or a fantastic narrative because it might supply one with a new belief is to reject all interaction with reality. The purpose of fantasy, of having that objective uncertainty in relation to all belief that is faith, is in order to liberate experience. Those who reject any particular mode of experience, whether it is what has been called in this project the rational, the literary/fantastic or the theological (or any other possible mode) is equally xenophobic and sophophobic. Each of them lives his own, peculiar reclusive life, sheltering himself with the rags of the ideas he loves and cherishes no matter how rotten or decrepit they might be nor the possibility of a better way of living. Not only is his existence unnecessarily impoverished, but also unnecessarily restricted. Perhaps he does not know that his mind holds the power of revolution, perhaps he does not perceive the oppression of the way in which he clings to the dysfunctional system which has become his intellectual and spiritual “home”.

How could such a depressing state of affairs have come into being? Barbra Hernstein Smith illuminates the situation:

The rigorous, unremitting work of Reason creates a tight, taut web, intertextual and interconceptual. Tighter and stronger than the shifting, contingent, partial, and always contestable ideas and claims produced and justified by mere experience or mere sentiment, preference, desire, imagination, faith, custom, or convention, the ideas and claims delivered and justified by Reason are unconditional, universal, and, for better or for worse, inescapable. ‘For better or for worse’ because, as I have been suggesting, the certainty or stability of belief promised and delivered by such a system becomes, for the believer, the inescapability of belief from the system. (120)

As it has been seen, the “tight, taut web” of reason disenfranchises wherever it is imported as a complete system of “knowing” or experiencing the world. Because its claims of totality, comprehensiveness and cohesion are eventually illusory, the system itself is not real and thus a fantasy. Yet one of the conditions of the system is that it

alone defines what is real such that an individual is disenfranchised from believing otherwise. “[A]rguments for Reason through Reason are evidently powerful and persuasive for many people, largely, it seems, because they are circular,” and in their circularity there is security dependent on the system’s very inescapability (118). In order to believe otherwise, in order to escape, fantasy is necessary. Historically, one of the fears related to fantasy was that escape is indulgent. The fear is obviously not entirely fabricated, fantasy is a tool which is free to be used by libertines just as much as by libertarians. It is the particular relation of fantasy to reason in literature which makes it an important function for the ongoing work of theology.

Reason, if it were efficiently employed, would create uniformity among humanity. Where it is used it is used just like magic, to exert power over another person in order to make it impossible for him to believe otherwise than the way in which one reasons that he must. “You’re being unreasonable” is the anthem of bickering people. The charge itself is one almost never absent from any argument. Of course, just because one is unreasonable doesn’t mean that he or she is in fact wrong. Many times, it seems, irrationality is right and reason wrong. Consider as an example the concept of preemptive war. The argument is such that if one knows that his nation will be attacked by another and that this attack will cause massive loss of life, a weakened ability to defend one’s own nation and so forth, it is reasonable that the nation under threat attack first and thus limit the potential for loss of life among its own citizens. The argument is reasonable, it “works” on its own terms. Yet as more and more have been asserting since the American invasion of Iraq, executed on the basis of this very rationale, it is not right. The problem does not lie within the system but without it—the assumption of violence here is too great to legitimate the act of violence. The reasoning again, in its presumption, inhibits the free action of the other

state. By assuming the intent is an actuality of violence, magically it becomes the case, within its own system of thought.

Fantasy is useful and dynamic because it has the ability to question assumptions (something which cannot come from within the thought process of that assumption), to challenge privilege and to liberate from intellectual oppression. It is in its essence an agent of diversity in contrast to the conforming nature of reason. What is more in the nature of man, to dream or to reason? Dreaming, fantasy, comes naturally whereas reasoning must be learned. The real danger of fantasy is that it can expose a person to who he really is. Belief, sentiment reflects what is within not the operation and effects of the fantasy itself. The fantasy is only one reagent, the other is the individual and belief is merely the product. The threat of fantasy is powerlessness. Pascal Engel describes it in this way:

[I]t may be rational for me to believe in God, but the very fact that I find the belief useful or beneficial in some way is not enough to create in me the corresponding state... This is why Pascal, after giving his famous wager argument for belief in God, advises us to go to church, to take the holy water, and to get the habits which regularly go with such belief: This will dull you ('Cela vous abêtira'). Getting oneself to get an habit does not count as stopping to have belief as a matter of habit or of passive disposition; quite the contrary. Getting the habit to have an habit may be voluntary, but the habit itself is not ... the very fact that I need to acquire the belief through some sort of causal process does show that beliefs are in general caused by some processes, even when the processes are, to a certain extent, under our control. (5)

If the danger of fantasy, then, is that it might reveal one's powerlessness to an extent over his own nature and character, the danger of reason is that it gives the illusion of power. That one might believe *this* narrative above all others does indeed say something about the individual!

Fantasy literature is not alone in its project of resistance against the force and dominance of reason through and after the Age of Enlightenment. It is given a

foundation and context from philosophers as diverse as Pascal, Hume, Kierkegaard and Newman. It provides a space for thought and experience that lie without the realm of reason which is still valuable and desirable. It is not epistemologically flawed, for it is a thing entirely and demonstrably out of reach by epistemology<sup>61</sup>; its foundations are in the subjective being of humanity and its experience as beings ruled more by sentiment than reason. Fantasy bears the ability to make a person human again, to diversify where there is uniformity and indeed to breathe life back into a theology which had long since suffocated under reason. Its perils are no more than those associated with being a living, sentient human. Its promise reflects nothing less than the promise of life and possibility. Of course, having begun this foray into the history of epistemology and belief with Aristotle, it seems fitting to conclude it by then remembering that it is just this very category, the possible, which Aristotle exalts and elevates far above even the actual.

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<sup>61</sup> “It is currently argued ... that this skeptical questioning of reason is fatally self-contradictory... As one such defender of reason puts it, post-structuralists, postmodernists, and others who reject the claims of classical rationalism are ‘in pursuit of an understanding whose possibility has in fact already ruled out on a priori grounds.’ This ability to rule out in advance all skeptical or adversarial views is a considerable advantage for any system of ideas. As might be expected, however, those whose views are thus ruled out don’t see it that way themselves. What they do see is the unbreachable circularity of the reasoning just given, each link of which depends on the prior acceptance of the claims, concepts, and definitions at issue” (Hernstein Smith 105-106).

## Chapter 6: New Directions and Conclusions

### **The Fantastic Thus Far**

The trend which I have traced through the tradition of what I have deemed and christened “fantasy” literature—indeed, the very characteristic which has guided the usage of this term—is the phenomenon in literature of employing certain hermeneutical or literary devices (such as the imagination or willing suspension of disbelief, born largely out of the Romantic period) in order to uniquely approach aspects of human existence which reason and its “realism” are unable to reach. They are the aspects and elements which Freud among others banished to the subconscious, the experiences which vanished in the demythologisation of the world. For this reason, much of the literature discussed thus far could be or already has been classified in philosophical terms as anti-rationalist literature. At times it even gives the appearance of being a literary polemic contra the Enlightenment and its intellectual value system.

However, to settle with either of these titles would be unbearably reductive. This literature is not simply reactionary, a movement bent on upheaval and the destruction of the epistemological hierarchy of the eighteenth century and onward. To begin with, the survey started in the seventeenth century with Milton, before the hierarchy even existed as such. To the contrary, this literature and this literary function have something positive to contribute both in terms of artistry and intellectual life. What they provide is a place for exploring what a society has difficulty considering with the tools otherwise available to it or which have sometimes has been forgotten altogether. Yet because of this immense power which it holds, power to inspire belief of many kinds and make real the impossible, it is in

fact susceptible to the prurient, the misguided and the false; ultimately, all the reasons for which Iris Murdoch claims Plato treated the arts with such great antipathy (*Fire*).<sup>62</sup> For the very same reasons, though, it became a place of refuge and empowerment to others seeking more spiritual and edifying discourse.

Considering this fact of the long history of fantasy literature as the instrument or location of positive theological endeavour, it follows that one can now begin to consider the significance of this literary phenomenon in light of its function. The claim being made throughout this paper is that fantasy literature has didactic value for theology as a discipline and for theological discourses more generally. That is, it can teach theology something about itself. To make the lesson that much clearer, the literature which has been highlighted and surveyed up to this point is literature which specifically and intentionally adopts theological tasks, questions, language, imagery and forms as a sort of case study in their interrelation. But being that the last writer under close study was MacDonald in the Victorian era, it becomes appropriate to ask particular questions: Where does this trend or line in literature go *after* MacDonald? Who, if anyone, is the right and proper inheritor of the legacy which he channelled?

### **After MacDonald**

Traditionally, the answer to questions like these is a very easy and obvious one. In terms of pure genre, it still is very much the case. The tradition renewed and in a way reinstated by George MacDonald's greatest Edwardian devotees, the Inklings (and especially Lewis) is a clear descendent in many ways of the earlier Victorian project. Still, there remains a great plurality in terms of ways in which one might very well answer these questions and, among them all, the one just mentioned

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<sup>62</sup> See below for an elaboration of this point.

might be the most banal and unsatisfying. The reason for a statement, which to some will undoubtedly seem rather controversial, is manifold. For one, Lewis's writing seeks in some way to recreate rather than renew or continue the project of his predecessor. He does not perceive the change in philosophical and social *sitz im leben* between himself and the man whom he called "master." He likewise does not recognise the collapse of certain ecclesial forms between the two periods, living at all times a mostly sequestered life at university and in the church. He appreciates MacDonald as a purveyor of something like 'timeless moral truths,' but ignores him as a writer who was very much *à la mode*. What is more, their theological views are askance and as the way they respectively relate them to their writing could be called much more, incompatible, even.

One of the key essays which has been written since the American-fuelled MacDonald revival of the last twenty years separating the legacy of the two was the rather straightforwardly titled "George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis" by Catherine Durie. In it Durie sets forth a multifaceted criticism of the established view of the MacDonald/Lewis relationship. She does so firstly by pointing out that Lewis actually does not at all respect MacDonald as a novelist, a revelation which should be abundantly clear to anyone who has ever read Lewis's writing on MacDonald,<sup>63</sup> but which has been overlooked either because of the overwhelming endurance of Lewis's affection or, shockingly, because many perhaps concur that MacDonald was a poor novelist. It would be pure folly to compare MacDonald as a novelist or writer to English or American contemporaries. The problem in brokering appreciation for MacDonald's literary magnitude has in no small part been one of education—that is,

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<sup>63</sup> David S. Robb laments that "It has taken a long time to shift the Lewis-driven consensus that MacDonald's novels are to be valued only for what they contain (their Christianity) rather than for what they are" (12)

most readers do not know how to read them for what they are. While Lewis was reduced to marking in MacDonald's novels a "queer awkward charm in their very faults," he fails to recognise MacDonald's position within the Scottish literary tradition. What is remarkable with Lewis is that he even knows the problem, he knows that in order to rightly appreciate MacDonald's novels one "will need to love Scotland too" (*Anthology* 17). David S. Robb comments:

Experience suggests that Lewis was actually correct, for it seem likely that adequate reassessment of these novels, if it is going to come at all, will come from the perspectives provided by critics consciously working towards a fuller understanding of Scottish literary traditions.  
(13)

Yet the difficulty for Lewis is that he doesn't, actually, or he would better love Scotland's literary tradition. His parochial view of Scotland and its literature as a whole is betrayed by the way in which he expresses the "queer awkward charm" of MacDonald's novels—likely the best thing he could say about the literature of, to his mind, a "queer awkward" place. If Lewis appreciated Scottish literature and culture in the same way he appreciated, for instance Milton, his appraisal would surely have been much different.

Yet what is arguably more important to the literary relationship between the two, however, is actually not Lewis's literary appraisal of MacDonald but how deeply and personally meaningful MacDonald was for Lewis. Of course, to an extent this was the idea behind MacDonald's mythmaking. Thus when Durie relates that "*Phantastes* heals the division Lewis senses in himself between imagination and reason; it reunites the real and imaginary, fact and ideal, by transfiguring the mundane conditions of his life [...]," she is not describing a phenomenal or unexpected result (168). Indeed, MacDonald would have undoubtedly been pleased. Yet *Phantastes* was even more than this to Lewis. Even Durie falls just short of realising the full

weight of it when she says “*Phantastes* becomes a metaphor for Lewis’s own experience [...]” (167). In a strange way, *Phantastes* actually *became* his experience insofar as Lewis would reinterpret his own personal history on its mythological terms. For this reason even the very scenes and characters take on much more weight of significance than they should and the fantasy becomes canonised and stagnant. The truth is that Lewis held MacDonald’s fantasy writings too close to himself to ever allow them to be what they really are which is fluid and dynamic.

This, then, also reflects the pair’s fundamental difference in understanding when it comes to fantasy. MacDonald’s fantasy resists allegory. Its symbols are pure and potent but remain unfixed, troubling, searching out the reader in their mysterious ambiguities.<sup>64</sup> Contrastingly, Lewis’s fantasy is many times not much more than allegory. For him the daring, fantastic move was to mix the sources of his metaphorical material so that he could have dryads and Father Christmas in the same setting. But in terms of the basic literary structure, not the material he chose to fill it

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<sup>64</sup> In this regard, MacDonald almost undoubtedly draws from Coleridge and his *The Statesman’s Manual*, copiously read throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In it Coleridge expounds the difference between symbol and allegory with reference to biblical interpretation, glorifying symbol while denigrating allegory: “It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no medium between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*. Faith is either to be buried in the dead letter, or its name and honours usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self complacency confounds SYMBOLS with ALLEGORIES. Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol [...] is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible [...] The other are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter, less beautiful but not less shadowy than the sloping orchard or hill-side pasture-field seen in the transparent lake below! Alas! for the flocks that are led to such pastures! ‘*It shall even be as when the hungry dreameth, and behold! he eateth; but he waketh and his soul is empty: or as when the thirsty dreameth, and behold he drinketh; but he awaketh and is faint!*’ (Isaiah xxix.8) O! that we would seek for the bread which was given from heaven, that we should eat thereof and be strengthened!” (*Sermons* 30).

out with, Lewis uses fantasy merely as a literary bank into which he can deposit the theology he has already developed and withdraw in exchange new mythological symbols to play with instead. Of course, one of the unique aspects of Lewis as a writer is just how much symbol he puts into his worlds, as Michael Ward has recently put notable work towards demonstrating.<sup>65</sup> Certainly at least in works such as *Till We Have Faces*<sup>66</sup> he does much more, but in these he follows MacDonald much less consciously (and thus ever more truly). But Lewis rarely brings his problems to fantasy. It would have been supremely interesting if *The Problem with Pain* were set in Narnia or some such world, but one imagines that this is a work somewhat more serious than could be played out in Narnia, even though Lewis always imagined himself infinitely serious about his fantasies. Instead, the more set his theological ideals, the worse the actual fantasy becomes. Often it betrays the fundamental difference in the way Lewis and MacDonald each approached God. Durie remarks:

Yet when Lewis reflects on his own history, he sees God as a divine Angler, playing a fish, and himself as hooked through the tongue (Lewis 1955, p.199); or God as a cat pursuing himself, a mouse. MacDonald could never have used these images of God, with their undertow of sheer power and even cruelty; there may be less affinity than appears between the two men. (177)

It is probably the case that Lewis did not even associate cat and mouse as a symbol of power or cruelty and found nothing violent or at all inappropriate about the terms in which he chose to express his conversion.<sup>67</sup> This is the degree of difference between

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<sup>65</sup> Ward, Michael. *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> See above section "Lewis and Eleusis" in ch. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis actually found immense spiritual value in a terrible God, or at least in the paradox of the Christian God as both lion and lamb. He perceives this in MacDonald (although he is more taken by the lion than the lamb), saying "nowhere else outside the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined," and "God is the only comfort, He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from" (*Anthology* 19; *Christianity* 24). Durie concludes, "But at this point we may begin to suspect that Lewis perhaps over-emphasizes one side of

MacDonald and Lewis as men; their minds operated with massive distinction towards the other. All the same, Durie makes a strong point in positing that the God of Narnia would have repulsed MacDonald and the thought of his own work somehow being responsible for it would likely have shaken him to his very spiritual core.

The point for which Lewis admires MacDonald the most is his insistence that *doing* must come before *feeling* or *understanding*. MacDonald writes, “Men would understand: they do not care to *obey*;—understand where it is impossible they should understand save by obeying,” (*Hope* 17). Durie opines that the effect of this single idea on Lewis cannot be underestimated: “Lewis takes the point wholeheartedly; in *The Abolition of Man* he argues similarly that obedience must never be postponed while a precept is rationally examined, for true comprehension will only come through practice” (149). Lewis grasped on to that facet of MacDonald which was most absolute, most forceful, but simply neglected the delicacy and nuance in MacDonald’s thought, driven by his overwhelming sentiment and compassion for all others.

The goal here is not at all to pass judgement between Lewis and MacDonald as theologians. Lewis was in many ways much more successful as an amateur apologist than MacDonald was as a lay theologian. Lewis, at least, could toe the line of establishments and institutions he worked under. Unfortunately this worked against Lewis as a fantasist. He seldom ever grasped in his own writing even the smallest part of fantasy’s potential for confronting the irrational and confounding reason itself. Mystery can be tasted in Narnia, in the science fiction novels, even in

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the equation, that he underlines inexorability rather than love, divine hardness rather than compassion; when he does so, he is realigning MacDonald to match his own temperament and taste” (171).

the heaven of *The Great Divorce*, but the only text in which it is actually palpable, à la MacDonald, is *Till We Have Faces*.

MacDonald is the exemplar here not because his theology was necessarily better (although for many contemporary readers and even theologians it might very well be) but precisely because it was “worse”<sup>68</sup> and the consequences of that drafted themselves into the very fabric of his fantasies. MacDonald’s fantasy is both flexible and dynamic, open to a diverse range of perspectives and yet still immensely affective and persuasive. I suggest that the way in which figures like Lewis and even J.K. Rowling inherit some of the tradition of George MacDonald (and even some of the theologically significant ways as was illustrated in the chapter concerning liturgy) is not in fact the way in which MacDonald himself inherits from Milton. To find MacDonald’s literary successor in terms of the function which has been discussed here, one must look elsewhere.

### **Sartre and Murdoch: Phenomenology and Symbol**

One possible place to look is to some of the great modern Existentialist novelists. These would seem like a logical move after having traced the philosophical grounding of the literary fantastic through Kierkegaard and others. Having come thus far by limiting the scope to just British literature, a momentary divergence is necessary in order to consider the hefty work of Sartre (despite his being French) before returning to more familiar territory with the Anglo-Irish Iris Murdoch. Yet even while dallying with the Continent, the dallying will be done through the eyes of

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<sup>68</sup> Worse here meaning problematic for MacDonald. Not only did it lose him his job as a clergyman, but he was constantly being bogged down by others accusing him of heresy in arguments which were arguably valid in the strictest sense but completely miss the thrust of MacDonald’s thought. Such opponents can be found in the interlocutors spread throughout his *Unspoken Sermons* and a few of the essays in *A Dish of Orts*.

a foreigner, i.e. an outsider, and Murdoch will play the part of the delighted but sometimes critical holiday-maker. Sartre was, of course, one of Murdoch's greatest interests and most enduring inspirations. By examining the pair of them one can achieve a better understanding of the way in which existentialism bifurcated and was digested by independent Anglo and Continental phenomenological movements with significant effect for the fantastic in literature.

The inevitable question at this point becomes why Sartre, Murdoch and not something more related to the traditional genre of fantasy? This is again because of the shift which the genre of Fantasy literature takes after the Victorian period to something which is much more rigid, much less robust and in many ways and instances entirely boring. The commercial success of Fantasy literature in itself partly signalled its own death knell as the literary foil to rationalism. The difficulty, of course, was that society had incorporated and assimilated all of its structures to the point which they were no longer very fantastic at all and their ability to inspire wonder, to shock and eventually to question fell into disorder and ruin. In *La Nausée*, Sartre achieves the fantastic through a sort of extreme isolation and existential introspection which tumbles over the borders of reason into a barely restrained insanity.<sup>69</sup> It abandons logic to the degree that its own conclusion appears as an abhorrent and unnatural growth which somehow lodged itself to the body of the narrative like a parasite and thereafter refused to leave. Roquentin's "solution" of writing a novel in order to somehow manufacture for himself a shred of meaning in the world of the contingent is purposefully unenthusiastic and illogical.

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<sup>69</sup> One must not give so much latitude or pity to Roquentin so as to forget that he is a man who feels sick when he touches things, imagines that the world touches *him*, whose only real dialogue partner a paedophile who calls himself a humanist and who generally sheds any and every recognizable aspect of humanity he can manage. Pity, perhaps, is appropriate but not admiration.

Even though it was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature, *La Nausée* divides opinion in literary circles. Murdoch says of its author, “His inability to write a great novel is a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicts us all. We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique but we seem to be unable to set it forth except in terms of abstraction” (120). What we might have with Murdoch’s opinion of *La Nausée* and of Sartre in general as a novelist might be something akin to the earlier difficulties Lewis had in appreciating the Scottish novels of George MacDonald. Part of the problem with reading *La Nausée* from an Anglo or American background, for instance, is that it is just so *French*. Its themes and conceits simply do not translate well into the English literary tradition. In fact, *La Nausée*, being a French book written in Berlin, is even further than Lewis’s Oxfordian culture was from MacDonald’s Aberdeenshire roots.

Furthermore, the troubled relationship of Murdoch (and many other English-speaking readers) to *La Nausée* was in fact also a product of deeply entrenched philosophical positions. The conflict was over what had come to be known as phenomenology—the nature and the origins of this discipline. Sartre wrote *La Nausée* while in Berlin, working and learning alongside Husserl, the discipline’s founder, and Heidegger. In it, Sartre plays and spars with the ideas which Husserl was putting forth at the time, only to eventually leave him in 1937 when the novel was being finished over a disagreement concerning Husserl’s conception of the transcendent ego (Drake 35). Similarly, Iris Murdoch was a postgraduate student of Wittgenstein at Cambridge and regularly gives affectionate jousts to her former teacher as well (e.g. her wordplay in *Under the Net*). Between Murdoch and Sartre,

then, is an epic gap in the way in which phenomenology<sup>70</sup> came to be understood in the analytic Anglo tradition and Continental tradition, respectively. Murdoch discloses both her regionalism and her philosophical commitments when she remarks of Sartre *et alli*:

It might even be argued that recent continental philosophers have been discovering, with great fuss, what English empiricists have known since Hume, whom Husserl himself claimed as an ancestor. However that may be, the anti-rationalist, anti-Cartesian, anti-essentialist enlightenment has developed in England in the form of an analytical philosophy of language [...] (*Sartre* 8)

Clearly, Murdoch is not opposed to Phenomenology *as such*, for she even says “The novelist proper is, in his way, a sort of phenomenologist” (*Sartre* 10). What she opposes is the kind of deconstructive phenomenology of Sartre which overstates the despair of language, destroys symbol and even objectifies the self (the ultimate aspect being the one which drove him from Husserl). Thus, even though Continental Phenomenology rightly inherits the peculiar Kierkegaardian proto-Existentialism which I have traced back as far as Hume, it cannot, through Sartre, embody the fantastic.

What *La Nausée* does accomplish in terms of finding an heir to the literary tradition of the fantastic is to provide an example or symbol of what Existentialism had become (aesthetically and philosophically) by the time of its first publishing in 1938. It was Sartre’s famous asking of the question “Can there be meaning in a world without God?” But the “world without God” which he creates also becomes a world of twisted contingencies which lacks any form of symbolic valuation, a world of unrelenting nausea and hopeless, listless fantasies about the future. It struggles to

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<sup>70</sup> While some would argue that Wittgenstein was not at all a phenomenologist, he himself says “You could say of my work that it is ‘Phenomenology’ ” (qtd. in Gálvez 13). What he meant was that his work was, essentially, phenomenology, although it was fundamentally of a different ilk than that being done on the Continent.

deal with the final consequences of the Kantian epistemological revolution. Yet one thing it also does is to strongly inspire, in a strange way, Iris Murdoch, and this is what is most significant for this study. Murdoch faced the same philosophical situation as Sartre, dealt with the same crisis of the dissociation and yet managed to retain the symbolic, and in doing so also write one of the great novels which she says Sartre never could.

### **Murdoch's Moral Philosophy as Resolved by the Symbolic in *The Bell***

The fundamental difference between Sartre and Murdoch is that where Sartre laboured to kill off the symbolic in the face of contingency, for Murdoch contingency just made the symbolic all the more valuable and beautiful. One great novelistic example of this was Murdoch's early work, *The Bell* (1958). This section will examine how Murdoch uses the symbolic as a literary/rhetorical manoeuvre which allows her to work through and around problematic areas of her moral philosophy in convincing ways, but also to draw the reader into a position of self-criticism. It exemplifies an aspect of Murdoch's work which is well known, but nevertheless important to rehearse in this case. That is, Murdoch's worlds, although described in realistic terms, are shot through with the fantastic. Many times this plays out in the way characters interact with each other, interpret their own circumstances, in the way which contingencies pile themselves into coincidence and eventually the numinous and even through the narrator which poses as omniscient and objective but is in actuality the subject of the perspective and idiosyncrasies of the character it follows.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> In *The Bell*, the conceit of unreliable narrator, at least unreliable in its guise of objectivity and omniscience, reveals itself in many ways which include discrepancies in accounts of shared events, especially in the interactions of Michael and Nick and Michael and Toby (eventually also Nick and Toby). Another indicator is how the narrator reveals in Ch. IV how Toby had recently learned the word "rebarbative" and

*The Bell* takes this Murdochian meme to the point that it greatly seems as if the whole narrative were written in the Gothic genre. It certainly is full of Gothic images and symbols with secretive nuns, slightly strange lay community, a priestly figure caught up in an inward spiritual deformity and acts of sexual malfeasance, an abbey bell and all it symbolises and portends and its mirror, Catherine, in all her strange, lovely and yet horrible elfishness. Then of course there are the dreams Michael is haunted with, which torment the poor man with their unholy images and horrifying consequences. Murdoch toys with her readers by including scenes which belong much more to the previous century than her own:<sup>72</sup>

The fantastic thought came to him suddenly that it was someone the nuns themselves had murdered. The scene was so unutterably sinister and uncanny that a suffocating fear came upon him and he pulled desperately at the neck of his pyjamas while trying in vain to utter a cry of alarm. He turned and found himself still in bed. The early morning light filled the room. He sat up in bed, still wrenching at his throat, his heart pounding violently. He had been dreaming; but so powerful was the experience that he sat there dazed for a minute, not sure if he was really awake, still overwhelmed by the horror of what he had seen. (78)

This clear Gothic trend is just one example of fantasy seeping into Murdoch's narrative, but it must be seen than more than mere literary "play" or a way of "quoting" that genre. Indeed, it points all the way back to Murdoch's foundational approach to symbols which considers them valuable and dynamic if very often slippery and dangerous.

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subsequently employs that word in every chapter which concerns his portion of the story, indicating that the narrator of these chapters is informed by his perspective and even his very vocabulary (44). Another example would be the incident between Toby and Dora under the bell which Nick claims was love-making, Dora claims was innocent and Toby remains ambiguous about.

<sup>72</sup> A quality which was likely an intentional act of homage to that era. Murdoch once said, "The most obvious difference between nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century novels is that the nineteenth century ones are better" (*Existentialists* 221).

That *The Bell* so closely resembles nineteenth century Gothic is itself a symbol, but with a catch. Like all of Murdoch's symbols, it is an ambiguous one. What exactly do these Gothic allusions portend for the narrative being played out? The reader cannot know what aspect of the genre is being summoned metaphorically or what it might foreshadow in terms of the plot. At the point where he is made privy to Michael's dream, it seems all too clear that the novel will somehow end in tragedy. But if this is true, how? Are the nuns really up to something quite sinister hidden away in their cloister? Who was the drowned body being drawn up from the pond? This is clearly the way Michael is set forth thinking about his own dream. Further incidents seem to corroborate it. For instance, the night that the lost bell is accidentally rung by Toby and Dora in the barn, Michael is awakened by it and told the next day by Paul that the old legend of the bell stated it still rung out sometimes from the bottom of the pond, always as an omen of death. But who's death?

The other possibility is that this is not at all the sort of Gothic which is being channelled. What if, for instance, Murdoch is writing in the style of Anne Radcliffe and every uncanny event which was viewed with symbolic import was to be, in the end, disposed of with the light of reason? Admittedly, seasoned readers of Murdoch might not consider this possibility or might otherwise dismiss it easily, but the question arises naturally and as early on in her novelistic career as *The Bell* appeared, Murdoch would have had to assume such a choice would have remain open and legitimate to her whole readership. What if the use of Gothic as a symbol was in itself a bit of a Gothic trick, a literary illusion rather than allusion, to be dispelled in the end with a good laugh while the reader comforted himself in knowing once more that there are in fact no such things as ghosts, or, rather, symbols?

To say that the symbolic value of Murdoch's use of the Gothic in *The Bell* has "a catch" is also to unashamedly digress and glory in the tasteless art of punning. For it is not only a slight or drawback, it is a trap. In fact, it is just the same sort of trap as was laid out by Milton in his depiction of Satan and MacDonald in his own use of Death, subtly turning the scope of criticism back onto the reader. In each of these incarnations the trap has functioned differently. Milton uses it puritanically to try and expose his readers to their own sin and weak spiritual character. MacDonald uses it pastorally and rather evangelically to ask his readers how they would respond to the paradox of the cross. Murdoch in her own turn uses the trap as a warning. The warning relates back to her perspective on the symbolic, its power and its perils.

Murdoch held lofty ideals where it concerned the novel, or in wider scope art itself, and its abilities to convey truth and benefit humanity. In fact, in an ironic twist, the novelist becomes for Murdoch not just a prophetic figure but a Messianic one. She writes in characteristic bourgeois hyperbole:

We are, apparently, entering an untheological time [...] The writer has always been important, and is now essential, as a truth-teller and as a defender of words [...] He is threatened today in both these roles. But I do not think the will to fight is likely to be weakened by the vanishing of the theologies: perhaps on the contrary. It may be in the end that the novelist will prove the saviour of the human race.  
(*Existentialists* 232)

It is, of course, the kind of statement which could only be made as an academic, somewhat removed from the tediousness of ordinary life. All the same, its basic thrust is a genuine one. Art really has replaced religion for much of society as far as providing meaningful narratives, symbolic structures and moral exhortations. Novelists, filmmakers, poets and musicians have replaced priests, popes and sages as the moral authorities for large portions of the so-called post-Christian societies. This doesn't necessarily mean that theology is obsolete, it just makes what happens in art

all that much more important. It brings attention to what I have been calling the “fantastic” faculty of literature which encourages its readers to deeply consider, in many cases, the very theological content they would automatically reject if presented in its traditional, Scholastic form. It means, in essence, that now more than ever is a time for theologians to look towards art in order to divine their own future.

It is not just theology’s future which lies with art and literature, but its past as well. The early and medieval Church famously abandoned traditional Jewish strictures against art, especially art which depicted divine character and action, in order to produce a mass of theologically infused music, sculpture, painting, stained glass, tapestry, architecture and all other manner of artwork. These artists, poets and musicians reached outside of the traditional boundaries of theology at that time to reach out to masses of people to whom theology had never been accessible. Of course, even within the Judaic tradition there was no estrangement from the process of doing theology through artwork. Indeed, the Jewish Bible is full of it, the Psalms being just one example. In fact it would be much more difficult to find parts of the Jewish Bible that are not strewn with literary and other artistic forms than to single out the ones which are not.

For Murdoch, though, the most important example comes from Classical Greece. In her essay explaining the relation of Plato, who clearly influences her greatly, to art she relates the strained history of conflict between poets and philosophers for control of the way in which theology was done and discussed:

[T]here are some fairly obvious answers to the question why Plato was so hostile to art. He speaks in the Republic (607b) of ‘an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry’. The poets had existed, as prophets and sages, long before the emergence of philosophers, and were the traditional purveyors of theological and cosmological information. Herodotus (ii.53) tells us that the Greeks knew little about the gods before Homer and Hesiod taught them; and Heraclitus

(fr.57) attacks Hesiod, whom he calls ‘the teacher of most men’, as a rival authority. (Fire 1)

Murdoch’s take on the era of godlessness is that it was a time in which artists (and of course, being a novelist, *especially* novelists) would rise to the forefront as “purveyors of theological and cosmological information.”

In *The Bell*, protagonist Dora, consistently resistant but not incessantly hostile towards traditional religious expression, finds her way to worship at that great London cathedral, the National Galleries:

Vaguely, consoled by the presence of something welcoming and responding in the place, her footsteps took her to various shrines at which she had worshipped often before [...] Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. (196)

The event serves as a parable for the way in which Murdoch sees the role of art recovering its former theological vocation.<sup>73</sup> Of course, it also betrays Murdoch’s own peculiar brand of intellectual double-speak. She states in *The Sovereignty of Good*, “almost everything that consoles us is a fake” (59). Of course art, as well as everything else Murdoch advocates like “the Good,”<sup>74</sup> are seemingly obvious

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<sup>73</sup> Murdoch supports this view elsewhere: “Good art, thought of as symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying” (*Fire* 76-77).

<sup>74</sup> Murdoch argues for “the sovereignty of the Good” even though unable and unwilling to say what it actually is, but rejects the notion that this actually condemns her philosophy for such ambiguous—one might even dare say flimsy—reasons as “excellence has a kind of unity to it” and “facts about our condition from which lines converge in a definite direction” and that it is only mysterious because it is unsystematic and pointless, like Death and Chance, and that this is apparently in its favour. She concludes by saying “We cannot then sum up human excellence for these

exceptions to the rule for her. In Murdoch, things are obvious when she asserts them but is unable or otherwise unwilling to defend them in any fashion.

If one takes a comprehensive reading of Murdoch's nonfiction, the thing which she calls fantasy takes quite a rhetorical beating. Obviously, she uses the word in its most humble sense, that of the private, indulgent creation of the human mind which seeks to comfort or pleasure itself. She warns that "Magic in its unregenerate form as the fantastic doctoring of the real for consumption by the private ego is the bane of art as it is of philosophy [...]" (*Fire* 79). Yet the fundamental disjunction of Murdoch's moral philosophy exposes itself here: while the self is apparently too extensive to be discarded in order for her to define in even the most minimal sense what the Good is, one is meant to be able to somehow inherently judge his experience and sort the real from the fantastic. Murdoch once famously told *The Times*, "We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality" (Knowles 536).

Murdoch reveals herself as a Platonic mystic, but an unordinary one with nothing to affix Platonic Forms to. This is why she need *also* be a mystic, so that this difficulty can be tossed into the sea of the ineffable. Yet, when she needs them, the Forms are brought back out and made obvious once again so that "The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality [...] Here too we can see it as natural to the particular kind of creatures that we are that love should be inseparable from justice, and clear vision from respect for the real" (*Existentialists* 374). It is difficult

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reasons: the world is aimless, chancy and huge, and we are blinded by self" (*Existentialists* 381-382). Even this seems to be a consolation for the inherent inexplicability of her argument and the necessary absurdity that goes along with it, the fact that the Good is ultimately as unknowable, indefinable and absent as the rejected God of Scholastic theism is resolved by the fact that it is pointless anyway. Indeed, this is what, in a perfect paradox, makes it so special (even though one wonders how being pointless could make anything special in a world where everything is supposed to be pointless).

to imagine how one could be anything but baffled by the proposition that the axiom “love should be inseparable from justice” is somehow obvious and intrinsic to human nature and that both of these are in fact indicative of “the real” and therefore also, again “obviously,” authoritative. If anything it would appear that neither love nor justice are “natural to the particular kind of creatures we are” and that the character of the “aimless, chancy” world which Murdoch says we are in is much more pervasive and “natural” if natural could be defined as either the way in which humans normally act or the continuity of human and animal behaviour. Thus it is also difficult to place too much credit on Murdoch’s declaration concerning human identity:

We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. This is to say that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense [...] Equally the various metaphysical substitutes for God—Reason, Science, History—are false deities. Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. (*Existentialists* 365)

Ultimately, Murdoch fails to resolve the contingent world with the immutable, coherent Good precisely because that Good is fixed, or one could also justly say lost, in the contingent rather than in the theological. Nevertheless, because Murdoch uses the symbolic to traverse the fundamental gap between the coherent and contingent in her novels and especially *The Bell*, they still provide excellent spaces for the theological because they are so open to and, one could argue *contra* Murdoch, in need of it.

The fact that Murdoch’s moral philosophy is functionally problematic should not by this point come as a surprise. Milton and MacDonald were also both adjudged heretics, their theologies did not “work” outside of their fictive creations in the same way that Murdoch’s does not. Also, just like Milton and MacDonald, Murdoch’s own perspective works out more cogently in her art than in her essays. This is as much

because of her own particular view of the role of the novelist than anything in her philosophy. Murdoch, in her essays, often writes about the destiny of man as *τελος*.

She declares:

That human life has no external point or *τελος* is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite,<sup>75</sup> and I shall simply assert it. I can see no evidence that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. (*Existentialists* 364)

Yet, if there is no *τελος*, what is the Good? Is that not the externally guaranteed pattern? If not, then how can Murdoch say “Good is a transcendent reality” (*Existentialists* 377)? The Good relates problematically to Murdoch’s concept of human *τελος* as philosophy, but their relationship in *The Bell* is much more fruitful.

### ***τελος* and the *Fantastic Hermeneutics of Experience***

Murdoch’s characters in *The Bell* suffer from the difficulties of interpreting the events of their own lives within an implied scheme or metanarrative (what Murdoch would call *τελος*). While in her philosophy such a *τελος* is always illusory, in *The Bell* the essentially fantastic nature of such a construction does not preclude its being real. Rather, Murdoch simply makes clear the tenuous nature of the hermeneutics by which one would not only determine such a narrative, but also classify experience with reference to it. This is how the fantastic functions in *The Bell* to destabilise the hermeneutical confidence and epistemological foundations of the reader and stymies his every attempt to rationalise and classify the symbolic content of the novel “on his own.”

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<sup>75</sup> This is a claim which would not likely be so easily conceded by most theologians or philosophers.

The best example of such an interaction comes with the character of the thoughtful, compassionate, wise, discerning, but unquestionably reprobate leader of the Imber community, Michael Meade. The reader is given an early clue as to the particular quandaries which Michael would later find himself in the relation of the story of how he came to found the lay community at Imber.

It was an aspect of Michael's belief in God, and one which although he knew it to be dangerous he could never altogether reject, that he expected the emergence in his life of patterns and signs. He had always felt himself to be a man with a definite destiny, a man waiting for a call [...] Michael knew the futility of his recent years, eaten by the *ennui* which he had tried to picture to himself as an insatiable thirst for the good. But now the pattern was at last emerging, the call had come. (*Bell* 81).

The key word in this passage is “dangerous”. Danger is, of course, a concept which was approached in the previous chapter when considering the risk of literary belief. Danger functions in much the same way here. It is a hermeneutical kind of danger rather than ontological or existential (although it could indeed become an emotional or spiritual danger or lead one into other areas of much more tangible dangers). To interpret one's own experience through the lens of an expected pattern or type is a hermeneutical endeavour. Every way of interpreting experience is hermeneutical, even the ways that seem to escape it through words like ‘empirical’ or, like so much of Murdoch's moral philosophy (and all other fundamentalisms) ‘obvious,’ or that which needs no interpretation.

Now, the fundamental danger of expecting one's life to develop with pattern, purpose, type or *τέλος* seems to be that such an expectation would in almost every case alter the subject's behaviour as he tries to make himself fit within a great purpose or narrative.<sup>76</sup> As that behaviour changes, it could develop more than the usual

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<sup>76</sup> Where such belief does not alter behaviour, the danger remains solely psychological but present all the same.

amount of unintended consequences if the interpretation itself is erroneous. For instance, the ennui which Michael experiences before his “call” to lead the Imber community is the result of two factors, the first being his belief that he was meant for good and the second the experiences which seemed to communicate he was incapable of serving the Good. Yet even the angst which resulted from these two forces in Michael’s life he interpreted Christologically, that he was in fact suffering *for the Good* and not because he had interpreted his experiences under a false schematic. This, then, is the magic of what literary fantasy can provide for theology. Whereas Murdoch the philosopher would have been forced to categorically deny all such interpretative measures, being that she could not accept any sort of transcendent *τελος*, Murdoch as the novelist knew that “artists can produce what they cannot account for” such that what was in her philosophy impossible becomes in her novel nuanced into that which is “dangerous” (*Fire 2*).

This leads to a deep truth which Murdoch knew very well but only ever grudgingly admitted: that the symbolic was necessary for human agency in navigating between the contingent or chaotic and that which is coherent, immutable. Murdoch claims from within her mystical Platonic framework that the world is illusion and the human task is to find reality. Yet this is just the very action which is impossible without the symbolic and the incorporation of the symbolic into one’s life and identity. Murdoch concedes that “Human beings need fantasies. The novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger” (*Existentialists* 234). Indeed, this is the very centre of all artwork and Murdoch knows it. “Art represents a sort of paradox in human communication. In order to tell the truth about anything complicated, we need a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal” (221). This is, in

essence, the claim which has been made throughout this paper as the intrinsic claim of what I call fantasy literature, that fantasy is a unique and dynamic device for truth to the point where it must be recognised as much more than “mere” fantasy and indeed as something supremely real.

In *The Bell*, Michael Meade’s fantasy is that he was meant and made by God for a purpose, the purpose of being a priest-like figure to others. Yet there was another type or pattern which Michael submitted to regularly, “Michael Meade at twenty-five had already known for some time that he was what the world called perverted” (99). Several fantasies weave through Michael’s perception of his self in relation to his homosexual desires, the first of which has already been mentioned: *Michael Meade is perverted*. That is, Michael was from a very young age subjected to the idea that there was something fundamentally wrong with his person. Regardless of whether that did him particular psychological trauma or even if it was to some degree true (for the idea that one is fundamentally sinful is not unique to homosexual Christians, but extends to all within the Augustinian tradition via Calvin of total depravity and original sin), the crucial consequence is that it founded a pattern of inevitability in Michael’s life where his sexuality was concerned. The inevitability concerned more than just the idea of inevitable homosexual dalliances, but of something much worse. Michael Meade had not, by the age of twenty-five, known that he was what the world calls a homosexual; he had known that he was what the world called perverted, a monster. Of course this is what leads him to imagine that there is something paternal and even *holy* in his twisted sexual relationship with his teenage pupil, Nick Fawley.

The whole account is filled with his fantasies, “Michael knew what he was doing. He knew that he was playing with fire. Yet it still seemed to him that he

would escape unscathed” (*Bell* 103). This of course is simply the basest of all fantasy, it is in fact pornography—Dionysian sex with no consequences. The first fantasy was one tempting him to a false reality—“Eat the fruit and you will become like God.” The second was one which concerned agency and causality, for at the very first point at which he is confronted by his temptation, Michael succumbs because he believes it is inevitable:

He knew that he was lost, and in making the discovery knew that he had in fact been lost for a long time. By a dialect well known to those who habitually succumb to temptation he passed in a second from the time when it was too early to struggle to the time when it was too late to struggle. (104)

Clearly Michael’s actions with his student were not inevitable. Yet one of the trademarks of what could be called “mere” fantasy or an inadequate hermeneutic of experience or interpretive folly is that it almost always destroys agency; it inhibits the symbolic from negotiating the contingent and the coherent. The third fantasy, however, is a syncretic one, or a fantasy of false consolation, perhaps even a Hegelian fantasy. It is a fantasy wherein a synthesis could be made between Michael’s faith and his desire. Naturally, the fantasy was not after all a synthesis at all but a way in which to maintain the object of desire without abandoning the faith and thereby a *de facto* abandonment of the faith insofar as it made faith the subject of desire. Now Michael could be priest, lover, teacher, father and brother to his student all at once—a fantasy so flimsy that it could hardly even last through the moment of its conception (106).

Thus the main tension in Michael’s life is not even between one fantasy and reality, but between two fantasies: Michael Meade as *being* a monster and Michael Meade as becoming himself. It is crucial to remember that throughout the works of Iris Murdoch it is the character who understands himself or is fully being as himself

who is able to incorporate the symbolic. What Michael realises in *The Bell*, years after his failure with Nick, is that the self is not that which is but that which God made one to be. Therefore, being as oneself is becoming oneself, not remaining in whatever state one happens to be in. This, then, is the centre of Michael's own moral philosophy which he thusly expresses in sermon to the Imber community:

So we too must learn to understand the mechanism of our spiritual energy, and find out where for us, are the hiding places of our strength. This is what I meant by saying that it is the positive thing that saves. We must work, from the inside outwards, through our strength, and by understanding and using exactly that energy which we have, acquire more. This is the wisdom of the serpent. This is the struggle, pleasing in the sight of God, to become more fully and deeply the person that we are; and by exploring and hallowing every corner of our being, to bring into existence that one and perfect individual which God in creating us entrusted to our care. (210-211)

This is a very nice sermon and summary of sound moral advice. It does, however, leave out one important thing which, from a theological perspective, is very troubling indeed: God. The God of Michael's moral philosophy is not much more than the God of the Deists, he has no involvement whatsoever with the people of his creation other than that he created them. Orthodoxy would suggest that such a Stoic position, and that term is not employed lightly, gets the basics right but forces the subject into the troublesome state of the individualist.

The problem with this man, a Romantic, suffering, noble and isolated hero, is that he is bound for failure. What is more, the narrative of his failure will not shed any false glory on his ultimate undoing. It will leave nothing but ruins. Relatively early on in the novel the reader is warned ominously, "Those who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed" (84). Perhaps this is one of the ways in which Michael's fantasy of himself as a monster and of his monstrosity in particular situations is part of what draws him to isolation, which turns slightly his vision of his own destiny from

priesthood to a type of *quasi* monasticism. One can see easily how the two are contiguous, but one should also be very precise in elucidating their difference. A monastic vocation, in the style of the lay community at Imber, is outside of the world, or at least halfway so. A priest, on the other hand, is imbedded in the world and its society. So it is apparent that the two visions are actually quite different from one another and are symbolic of the disjunction which plagues Michael's attempts to negotiate τέλος and the Good.

As the novel closes, after the failures of Michael and several other members have brought about the dissolution of their community, after Nick first tries to betray the return of the bell to Imber Abbey and the induction of his twin sister, Catherine, and then, on seeing its disastrous consequences kills himself, the nuns go on in their spiritual purity<sup>77</sup> with their bell quietly instated and Michael returns to the world. He returns a changed man. His grief over the death of Nick, in a way, kills him and the last remnants of his old self. In a way, it is his baptism. He is reborn as something much different. The former Michael was consumed, even in his piety, by profound egocentrism. It is this vice which even more so than his sexual conduct prevented him from interpreting himself in his world as his self which was becoming. By his unselfing, he goes further in becoming himself than ever before. In the depths of his grief and despair, "absorbed in himself so utterly," he comes to believe that "At the human level there was no pattern" and thinks, "There is a God, but I do not believe in him," (320-321). This is the absolute bottom for Michael's spirituality, he died there

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<sup>77</sup> Throughout the novel, the nuns in every case prove to be exceptional spiritual characters, not unlike the saints of the hagiographies, speaking with truth, clarity and divine wisdom and acting always in charity and never in harsh judgement. The Abbess is renowned for her strength, holiness and authority throughout. The sisters treat Toby only with kindness when he sneaks into their enclosure. Also, ultimately, it is a sister who strips to her underclothes to dive in the pond and rescue the penitent Dora and at that point insane Catherine.

and then. Yet, in a more subtle type of euchatastrophe, grace finds him out, there where he had hidden himself in his own guilt, unbelief and self-loathing love picked him up and bathed him first with silence and then rebirth:<sup>78</sup>

Eventually a kind of quietness came over him, as of a hunted animal that crouches in hiding for a long while until it is lulled into a kind of peace. The silent days passed like a dream [...] Very slowly a sense of his own personality returned to him. The annihilating sense of total guilt gave way to a more reflective and discriminating remembrance. It was indeed as if there was very little of him left now. (321)

His self is renewed in unselfing, a concept much more familiar to theologians in their own terms as his *kenosis*. What is the vehicle, the reagent, the very catalyst for this metamorphosis? It is nothing other than the most potently symbolic object in the narrative, the abbey bell itself.

Throughout the novel the reader is (mis)lead into thinking of the bell as a symbol of death and tragedy. That is undoubtedly a large part of its function, but only because the characters themselves read its symbolic function as such. But to focus solely on this aspect of the abbey bell misses the most fundamental role of a church bell which is to deliver a call to worship. A church or abbey bell will undoubtedly share as a part of its functions occasional duties in announcing or mourning the dead, but the vast majority of its ringing will be to call in the worshipers. The interesting facet of this particular aspect of the bell is that the devout, by the very definition, know when it is time to worship. But the bell at Imber Abbey rings out for the whole town and surrounding countryside to hear, beckoning even those estranged from God to come and worship.

It is the bell which both slays Michael and calls him back to life. Nick, in his cynicism, ambushes the bell on its way into the abbey. Catherine, not at all secure

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<sup>78</sup> Note how similar the account of Michael is to the account of Job as it was related in Ch. 1.

with herself, misinterprets the event as God's condemnation of her secret love of Michael. She promptly goes insane and tries to drown herself in the pond. When Nick learns what his actions have done, he kills himself and when Michael learns of Nick's demise his own heart is shattered and drifts away into oblivion. All the same, the bell is installed, and grace comes to restore Michael to his new self. Even "next door, as it were, to total unbelief" a prayer returns to him. Even though he deems it "egotistical" it is the best kind of egotism, that which recognises helplessness. The refrain that comes to his mind comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> century hymn *Dies Irae*:  
 "Quaerens me, sedisti lassus/Redemisti Crucem passus/Tantus labor non sit cassus"  
 (322).<sup>79</sup>

Ironically the hymn comes from the same ancient time as the fictional bell of Imber abbey.<sup>80</sup> It is as if the bell called to him, through all of his grief. It seems meaningful then that the inscription on the original bell read, "*Vox ego sum Amoris, Gabriel vocor.*" The bell is the voice of love, Gabriel, who in the gospels announced the advent of God's love in the world.<sup>81</sup> Michael does not lose pattern, destiny, or divine vocation, he is found by them. At greatest need, in the hour of his undoing and remaking, Michael receives the call to worship even though he is next door to total unbelief. His selfishness has largely passed (what Murdoch identifies as virtue) and what remains are his new self and worship:

No sharp sense of his own needs drove him to make supplication. He looked about him with the calmness of the ruined man. But what did, from his former life, remain to him was the Mass [...] The Mass remained, not consoling, not uplifting, but in some way factual. It contained for him no assurance that all would be made well that was

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<sup>79</sup> "Faint and weary, thou hast sought me/On the cross of suffering bought me/ Shall such grace be vainly bought me?" Translation by William Josiah Irons as printed in *The English Missal* (London: W. Knott & Son Ltd., 1912).

<sup>80</sup> Paul Greenfield relates the information that Imber Abbey was formed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and that the bell itself was lost sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (38).

<sup>81</sup> Lk. 1:26-33.

not well. It simply existed as a kind of pure reality separate from the weaving of his own thoughts. (321)

It is the Mass which brings Michael back to reality, to existence. Even in its very own liturgical fantasy, it is to Michael the thing most real. It is the ultimate example of how, in Murdoch, as in the other literature which has been examined, as in all of the fantastic literature under study in this project, symbols bring the real to bear.

In this way Murdoch becomes a very appropriate author with whom to conclude the survey of fantasy literature. In one way it is fitting because it demonstrates how fantasy literature as I have defined it outgrew its own genre and expanded in unexpected directions. I doubt Murdoch herself would have been very much pleased to find her novels being spoken of as fantasy literature. Indeed, the very fact that Murdoch as a philosopher would undoubtedly never have herself entered the sort of conversation I have placed her in serves as a testament and case in point for the argument that I set forth from the beginning: fantasy, by upsetting the epistemological hierarchies of the Enlightenment and its legacies, provides a space which allows and entices people who might be otherwise unwilling or unable to engage in theology through a type of literary or liturgical belief. The work of Iris Murdoch is clear in this respect; as a philosopher she was dismissive of religion and theology, but as a novelist she engaged them deeply and meaningfully.

## **Conclusions**

Murdoch is a powerful symbol of the fundamental lesson which fantasy teaches, that one can only see and understand that which he will believe in.<sup>82</sup> For instance, if a Protestant theologian wishes to understand and say something about the

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<sup>82</sup> To “make believe” is the literary equivalent of the obedience which MacDonald, then Lewis claim is necessary for spiritual development.

Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, he must first understand that doctrine from within the Catholic perspective. He must adopt a belief, even if propositional, in order to even be able to consider the idea he is confronted with. Likewise, if a Catholic theologian wishes to understand the Protestant conception of “the Church” he must first set aside his own perspective and even definition of the word “church” in order to, in a moment, believe and then understand his fellow. The point is overwhelmingly simple, as it is in fantasy literature, even though the route to it has been complex.

The problem is that when beliefs are seen as constitutive of the actual individual, all ideologies and academic disciplines suffer (only theology suffers to a greater degree insofar as its participants’ beliefs are all the more deeply held). We refuse to proverbially “walk a mile in another’s shoes” because we fundamentally believe that if we take off our own shoes we shall die! It is not that this is an age without belief, even without irrational belief, it is just that belief itself is so much more heavily guarded. The antipathy which exists towards theological discourse in so much of western society is not a problem of not enough belief, it is a problem of a kind of belief which is more like neurotic certainty.

The lesson is simple, but wide reaching. This project has pointed itself specifically at theology simply because it has so much to gain or lose. Yet one can see its wide ranging significance outside of theology and even the university. It has consequences for all discourse. Therefore it is also a lesson about politics (domestic and international), a lesson about interpersonal relationships, a lesson about hermeneutics and so forth. The reason for examining this principle through the relationship between theology and fantasy literature is that this is a story of human thought and discourse in that it demonstrates the dynamic potential of the willing suspension of disbelief in conjunction with the adoption of literary belief (or in

theological language *kenosis* and *charity*). The potential here is not some moralising, utopian one. Rather, it is about radical, constructive discourse and a renewed, robust way of speaking about theology.

Fantasy feeds on desire—both virtuous and unwholesome. The fundamental desire is that reality might become something better than what it is. It is a desire which lies beneath Milton, MacDonald and Murdoch alike. Yet it does seem, though, that here at the very end it is not enough to simply motivate desire, because insecurity is in itself a power which operates over and above one's desires. For some, perhaps, that will be enough. But for others there will need to be more than a motivation towards desire or beauty, there will need to be a drive towards courage. In pursuit of courage, it is appropriate to turn at last again to theology and Paul Tillich and his seminal volume *The Courage to Be*. Courage is the last resort for preserving the possibility of a theological future infused with and driven by the fantastic and is, indeed, the tonic for times which are troubled morally, economically, spiritually and politically. Tillich's seminal work nominates itself in this matter because since the time it was forged from a series of lectures and published in 1952, *The Courage to Be* has seen straight to the centre of the weak, egotistical, impotent and neurotic character of so much of modern discourse.

Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of nonbeing. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of nonbeing upon itself by affirming itself either as part of an embracing whole or in its individual selfhood. Courage always includes a risk, it is always threatened by nonbeing, whether the risk of losing oneself and becoming a thing within the whole of things or of losing one's world in an empty self-relatedness. (154)

In a world that is full of risks—existential, spiritual and otherwise—Tillich boldly claims that courage is the only meaningful response.

*The Courage to Be* comes from the heart of Tillich's ultra-masculine perception of reality, which is perhaps something well needed when so much theology is well and truly neutered. Its message, the word which it speaks into the void of doubt and nonbeing, is humble and strong. Tillich knows, intimately, the troubles of nonbeing and he looks this spectre in the face and banishes it through the courage to be. It is the seemingly timeless Cartesian question which he responds to as well as Kant and his tradition and even the atheist existentialists. Tillich claims "By affirming our being we participate in the self-affirmation of being-itself. There are no valid arguments for the 'existence' of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being, whether we know it or not" (*Courage* 181). Yet Tillich's call to arms might not be as bullish or Byronic as it might seem. In truth Tillich's call for courage comes not from a position of strength but one of weakness.<sup>83</sup>

The courage which takes this threefold anxiety [fate/death, emptiness/meaninglessness, guilt/condemnation] into itself must be rooted in a power of being that is greater than the power of oneself and the power of one's world. Neither self-affirmation as a part nor self-affirmation as oneself is beyond the manifold threat of nonbeing [...] [E]very courage to be has an open or hidden religious root. For religion is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. (154-155)

What makes Tillich's courage unique and important is that it is courage for the weak. Naturally, this is also what makes it so intensely Christian. In it one returns to St. Paul's Christocentric definition of human weakness, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (1 Co. 12:10). The Kierkegaardian "leap" works but only as courage for the courageous, not for the weak. The courageous do not need help being what they already are. They simply need to be spurred into action. But what about those for whom the leaping itself is the impossible?

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<sup>83</sup> Unlike so many of Michael Meade's attempts in *The Bell*.

For Tillich this courage for the weak is not just intended for weak people, but is actually flowing from the heart of their doubt, or, like Murdoch's Michael, next door to total unbelief. This is what, for Tillich, puts the Reformation at the pinnacle of the whole history of the courage to be. Tillich's explanation on this point is worth quoting at length:

In the courage of the Reformers the courage to be as oneself is both affirmed and transcended. In comparison with the mystical form of courageous self-affirmation the Protestant courage of confidence affirms the individual self as an individual self in its encounter with God as a person. This radically distinguishes the personalism of the Reformation from all the later forms of individualism and Existentialism. The courage of the Reformers is not the courage to be oneself—as it is not the courage to be as a part. It transcends and unites both of them. For the courage of confidence is not rooted in confidence about oneself. The Reformation pronounces the opposite: one can become confident about one's existence only after ceasing to base one's confidence on oneself. On the other hand the courage of confidence is in no way based on anything finite besides oneself, not even on the Church. It is based on God and solely on God, who is experienced in a unique and personal encounter. (*Courage* 163)

Tillich's courage for the weak derives strength from the unity of communities and from the transcendence of being-itself, that is, God. That the solution to human insecurity, doubt, anxiety and weakness should, for a theologian, rest in God himself should not be surprising. Tillich does not offer a great amount of hope of a fully-fledged courage to be for those who reject God as such, but what he does is to give help in this respect by helping people to understand that being-itself is God. Therefore by affirming being, one affirms being-itself (in a Platonic way) and is on the doorstep of experiencing a God which, Tillich says, is above the God of theism.

While the God above theism might be good news to those who never really got on well with the God of theism, it is potentially more challenging for believers. For it is not only those who disbelieve in a proposition who need to change perspective in order to properly consider it, but just as much and perhaps even more

so those already accept it. For theologians, this means at least in part following in the footsteps of Meister Eckhart who abandoned “God,” for God’s own sake.<sup>84</sup> The good news, from Tillich’s very Protestant perspective, is that the God above the God of theism has been around the whole time:

The God above the God of theism is present, although hidden, in every divine-human encounter. Biblical religion as well as Protestant theology are aware of the paradoxical character of this encounter. They are aware that if God encounters man God is neither object nor subject and is therefore above the scheme into which theism has forced him [...] They are aware of the paradoxical character of every prayer, of speaking to somebody to whom you cannot speak because he is not ‘somebody,’ of asking somebody of whom you cannot ask anything because he gives or gives not before you ask, of saying ‘thou’ to somebody who is nearer to the I than the I is to itself. (*Courage* 187)

The point here is that fantasy talks about reality in much the same way that theology must talk about God. In the words of Murdoch, it “represents a sort of paradox in human communication. In order to tell the truth about anything complicated, we need a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal” (*Existentialists* 221). Fantasy is a way of relating to a reality which is much larger than the human capacity to analyse it rationally. In the same way, theology must find a way of speaking the unspeakable and believing the unbelievable. Yet, in doing this, it does not depart from its tradition or its truth claims, but rather seeks them out and finds them closer to their root. Christian theology was born in fantasy, the fantasy which goes beyond fantasy. It was a theology beyond reason, because it believed in a God who was beyond reason, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Co. 1:25).

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<sup>84</sup> Eckhart is not encouraging wholesale abandonment of God in his “Qui audit me” but rather encouraging the abandonment of preconceived notions and assumptions about who and what God is. For more on this see Cupitt’s *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM, 1980).

We have seen how through the history of British literature, from Milton to the present, fantasy has been the place which time and again great thinkers and writers come to in order to be bathed with the liturgical, to experience and contemplate the unreasonable God, the “God above the God of theism.” The relationship between theology and the fantastic, between the literary and the liturgical is still one which is being worked out. There is no fairytale ending to this story. For what is required in order to renew and revive fantastic theology is something much more than “faith and trust and a little bit of pixie dust”—what is required is the Kierkegaardian leap into objective uncertainty, which itself can only be mastered with something like the Tillichian courage to be. Still, the fantastic provides an avenue back to theological inquiry which exists beyond reason and a liturgical hermeneutics capable of navigating the chasm between this and other worlds.

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