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Introduction

Time is ever-present. Humans mark it, spend it, waste it, miss it, cherish it, and rebel against it. We live in time, and are dominated by it, though rarely do we take the long view beyond our immediate concerns and actions. We have words for our perspectives on time: nostalgia, reminiscence, anticipation, intention. If we were to stop and consider our basic orientation to time, we would find that we tend toward the past or toward the future (but rarely, and oddly so, do we simply stand in the present). For those holding religious beliefs, we orient ourselves to time and in time by the mythologies underpinning those beliefs, stories that tell of origins and endings, and of living in between. For J.R.R. Tolkien and his friend C.S. Lewis, the true myths of Christianity informed, shaped, and guided their thoughts, lives, and creative works, in ways that continue to make an impact on their audiences nearly half a century later. At the center of Christianity is the eucatastrophe of the Gospel message: Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, which radiates backwards and forwards throughout human history. We can imagine Tolkien and Lewis, as friends and as authors, standing side by side at this central point of their faith. In examining both Tolkien's and Lewis' writings, specifically in the fantastic mode, we find that each author has a basic orientation to time: Tolkien looks backward, and Lewis looks forward. But first, what is time, that we should be mindful of it?

Time did not exist before the creation of Earth and all things in it (and beyond), neither does time have existence in itself.¹ What we experience as a succession of moments in time is sustained by the creating, powerful Word spoken outside of time in the 'simultaneity of eternity'², the constant present of God. The word of *being* constantly sounds throughout the universe, and it is in that being that we began, live, and progress toward an end. St. Augustine of Hippo, in his meditations on time and eternity, finds the measurement of time in our minds, and determines that memory is crucial to the conception of earthly time. For, as created beings in a succession of moments, we change, and remember that change, and thus measure it in our minds and souls, from the vantage point of our present. As Augustine progresses through his investigation on time, he concludes that the past and future do not exist, though we commonly speak of past, present, and future as three different times. Rather, the 'present considering the past is memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is

expectation,' and these are 'in the soul as three aspects of time'.³ Memory, awareness, and expectation: the passage of time is in direct correlation to our perception of it. It is the process and actions of retaining the past and inferring the future from the present in our selves that determines how we talk, think, and live about time.

For the mind expects and attends and remembers, so that what it expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers. Who therefore can deny that the future does not yet exist? Yet already in the mind there is an expectation of the future. Who can deny that the past does not now exist? Yet there is still in the mind a memory of the past. None can deny that present time lacks any extension because it passes in a flash. Yet attention is continuous, and it is through this that what will be present progresses towards being absent. So the future, which does not exist, is not a long period of time. A long future is a long expectation of the future. And the past, which has no existence, is not a long period of time. A long past is a long memory of the past.⁴

Tolkien's Long Memory

In a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien closes by quoting from the Exeter Book: 'Less doth yearning trouble him who knoweth many songs,' commenting 'Longað! All down the ages men (of our kind, most awarely) have felt it: not necessarily caused by sorrow, or the hard world, but sharpened by it'.⁵ Yearning: not caused by 'sorrow, or the hard world,' but increased, revealed, highlighted by them.

The Elves, whose story in Middle-earth's history known as the *Silmarillion* shows them as the central players, move to the periphery in *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)*, and into realms in which 'ancient things still lived on in the waking world'.⁶ The Elves of all the races of Middle-earth typify this keenest and most persistent of emotions known as yearning. It is the High Elves, who remember Valinor, a 'kind of Paradise, the home of the Gods',⁷ the Blessed Realm in which they lived before their 'fall' and exile, who create in Middle-earth enclaves of beauty and peace, though tinged with sadness and regret. By the end of the Third Age, Elves such as Galadriel and Elrond have moved to the periphery of a history they partly shaped, and though their wisdom and efforts do much to strengthen the Company in its quest, still, their influence and abilities have largely diminished. Their memories set them in sharp relief against the events of contemporary Middle-earth, and their yearning for the True West sets their faces toward the West, and the past. Valinor is a place of peace, song, safety, learning, and harmony, an Eden before the arrival of Morgoth and the subsequent war(s), and everything the Elves create, think, and speak is oriented toward that Edenic place and time. It is as though they continue in a forward motion, yet remain facing backward.

As is well known, Tolkien spent much of his life and his time creating and developing his own private languages, recording in early poems and stories the beginnings of a history in which these languages could grow. He wanted to develop a cohesive mythology for England, ‘cycles linked to a majestic whole’.⁸ Tolkien writes that these stories – ‘from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy story’ – arose in his mind as “‘given things,” that he always had the sense of recording what was already “there,” somewhere: not of inventing’.⁹ Elsewhere Tolkien says of himself, ‘I am historically minded’.¹⁰ Tolkien takes great pains to clarify that Middle-earth is our Earth – a real place that we are familiar with, but that the events transcribed in *The Silmarillion* and *LOTR* happened at an imaginary history point in time, an imagined past.¹¹ At the close of *LOTR*, it is the end of the Third Age; the time of the Elves has gone, and it is now time for Men to shape Middle-earth’s history. Though the Elves are the most obvious manifestation of Longað, Tolkien’s entire oeuvre is permeated with this yearning, this past-ward gazing.

In describing the anonymous author of *Beowulf*, Tolkien also described himself when he wrote of the ‘learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical’.¹² But if the ‘old times’ are past, and no longer exist, what then is the permanent and symbolic ‘something’ we remember? Yearning, nostalgia, regret. Sorrow and exile. Tolkien saw human nature, and by extension, language, as ‘soaked in a sense of exile,’ our minds occupied with ‘thoughts of peace’ and equally occupied with ‘thoughts of its loss’.¹³ As a devout Christian, Tolkien located this memory of peace, and its subsequent loss, in Eden, our Paradise of human-divine relationship on earth. This biblical myth of Eden, so far removed from our present, so long a memory of our past, yet endures as a permanent symbol of what is, for and in man, ‘now long estranged,’ yet ‘not wholly lost nor wholly changed’.¹⁴

Lewis' Long Expectation

In C.S. Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the valiant mouse Reepicheep accompanies Caspian and the Pevensies in their travels and adventures. While he aids the king of Narnia in his immediate quest to find the seven lost lords, Reepicheep has a longer purpose, a higher hope for his sea-faring travels: to sail ever eastward and find Aslan’s country. Reepicheep knows that it is always ‘from the east, across the sea’¹⁵ that Aslan comes to Narnia. Though he does not know whether that country is one to which he can sail, he nonetheless expects to find an answer, a further adventure. This anticipation of fulfillment stems from the prophecy spoken over him as a baby, that in the utter East ‘where sky and water meet,/ where the waves grow sweet’,¹⁶ he would find what he seeks. Implicit in this message is that Reepicheep can journey to this eastern realm, but what it will be like once he arrives, and what he will find, he does not

exactly know. But he knows Aslan, and he knows that any country that bears Aslan's name is worthy of desire and pursuit. So this remembered prophecy that sparked his journey to where Aslan dwells, and the intimations in Narnia that point him to that place, compel Reepicheep to link his quest with the Dawn Treader for a little while, for, as he says to Lucy at the beginning of their journey, 'I don't know what it means. But the spell of it has been on me all my life'.¹⁷

If there are words that speak of what lies behind us, there are also words that speak of what lies before us. Desire, longing, anticipation. Satisfaction and fulfillment. Like Tolkien, Lewis also thought and wrote deeply on desire, yearning. He used the German word *Sehnsucht*, a word that encompasses nostalgia, homesickness, the intense missing of something we can't quite define. 'The central story of my life is about nothing else' than this experiencing of desire, Lewis once wrote.¹⁸ 'But a desire is turned not to itself but to its object',¹⁹ and it was not until his conversion to Christianity (aided in part by Tolkien), that he was able to define the object of his desire, and indeed, what he came to believe was every person's desire: Heaven, our 'proper place'.²⁰ We live in time, but we are 'destined for eternity'.²¹ This incongruity between our daily lives and our ultimate home makes us ache; we have an 'inconsolable secret' that we cannot tell 'because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience'.²² And part of our inconsolable secret is the 'sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers,' and long to 'be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality'.²³ 'Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not [...] a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things [we are] meant to do'.²⁴ Hope, spurred by a 'promise' becomes 'highly relevant to our deep desire. [...] The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last'.²⁵ Expectation is hope in action: the sense that what we have fixed as the object of our desire will come to pass, at some future time, some time not yet present.

This atmosphere of expectation pervades Lewis' writings. Donegality, as Michael Ward understands it, is the 'spiritual essence or quiddity of a work of art [...]; it's peculiar and deliberated atmosphere or quality [...] that the author consciously sought to conjure, but which was designed to remain implicit in the matter of the text'.²⁶ If Lewis' pervading philosophy of imagination and truth could be distilled to one phrase, it might be that oft-repeated creative writers' workshop motto: show, don't tell. And in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy*, *The Great Divorce*, Lewis shows us, in stories and symbols, the expectation with which we live, whether we are aware of it or not. Symbols are funnels into greater truths and concrete realities that lie behind, or beyond, the immediately available sign. And symbols are also a form of spiritual revelation, an interpenetration of the present by the timeless, a marker that stirs our

expectation by pointing toward an approaching future. Lewis saw in the Christian symbols of cross, text, son (and lion) the revelation of the divine Logos, in which the lower things of this familiar creation are made to shape our desires, whet our appetites, and sustain our long expectation for the higher things still to come. Though Reepicheep tried to be sad for the sake of those saying goodbye at the end of the Dawn Treader's voyage, he 'was quivering with happiness'.²⁷ For the closer we get to our proper place, the stronger its intimations and the clearer its symbols become, and the shorter our expectation, until at last we find that 'the dream has ended: this is the morning'.²⁸

The Present Fantastic

A question persists: given their strongly theological perspectives, why would Tolkien and Lewis choose to write in the fantastic mode, and by it explore what it means to live in time, to remember and expect?²⁹ Fantasy and fairy-stories often have to address the charge that they are nonsense falsehoods and misleading delusions. "'Why,'" (some ask), "why, if you have a serious comment to make on the real life of some men, must you do it by talking about a phantasmagoric never-never land of your own?"³⁰ A child (or a gullible adult, one supposes) might be tricked into thinking a fairy tale true in the 'real world', and so be made unfit for functioning in the world; he or she will not be able to distinguish fact from fiction, friend from foe. On the contrary, Tolkien and Lewis reply. 'Fantasy is founded upon the recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it'.³¹ And since it is 'so likely that [we] will meet cruel enemies [in the world], let [us] at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage',³² for one of the things an author writing in the fantastic mode wants to point out is that the 'real life of men is of that mythic and heroic quality'.³³ St. George slaying the dragon may show us courage and perseverance in the midst of fear better than our parents simply telling us not be to afraid of the closet-monsters ever could.

A story in the fantastic or mythic mode is one that says, 'Well, it's like *this*...isn't it?' If it is a story about memory, experience, and expectation, then its significance, its meaning is 'best presented incarnate in the world of history and geography'³⁴; in other words, *in time*. Just as the divine Word became flesh in human history, so too mythic and fantastic stories must be set in a historical, geographic world, one possessing its own 'inner consistency of reality'.³⁵ Elves, eldils, talking lions, and worlds in which they make sense, and more than that: 'The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be like "real life" in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region'.³⁶ In a 1950 letter, Lewis asked his correspondent to 'notice how we are perpetually *surprised* at Time. In heaven's name, why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is *not*

temporal'.³⁷ Our memories are apparently spotty when it comes to our expectations. We are destined for a new Heaven and a new Earth, a New Jerusalem. But what has Jerusalem to do with Faërie?

First, what is Faërie? Well, it 'cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible'.³⁸ It must, 'if only in the form of fiction,' be experienced.³⁹ It is a separate region, a 'set apart' realm, a world in which 'all that you had (or knew) [is] dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild'.⁴⁰ Rivers run with wine, time runs on a different clock, and humans once upon a time run against the boundaries of Faërie only to find themselves unexpectedly on the other side. Above all, Faërie is about desire, and the 'making or glimpsing of Other-worlds'.⁴¹ Of Man, Lewis writes that 'fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth'.⁴² The settings of Middle-earth and Narnia were not mere quirks of taste. For Tolkien and Lewis, writing about desire and longing, about Eden and Heaven, about hope, joy, and satisfaction meant that they had to open a door into Faërie, into Other Time. The vocabulary of Faërie uniquely allows its visitors to speak of 'things not found within recorded time'.⁴³ In other words, it allowed them (and us) to speak of the inconsolable secret of permanent and enduring somethings which we carry, always and everywhere, within us.

In his autobiography, Lewis wrote of the profound experiences of what he called Joy in his early life⁴⁴; seeking out more of these flashes characterized much of his inner life before and at the beginning of his Christian life. While Tolkien was much more reticent (per usual) about his inner and Heaven-ward life, he also recognized joy as a vital and integral part of human experience. Both Tolkien and Lewis linked the search for and experience of joy to truth and reality, and likened the infrequent (and usually unsought-after) experiencing of it to glimpsing an underlying Reality. Joy is being in the presence of God, a direct experience of the reality of His glory and radiance. Such experiences are 'a sudden and miraculous grace',⁴⁵ unsought and surprising when they do come, life-altering eucatastrophes in this journey 'upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive'.⁴⁶ Tolkien and Lewis would most certainly have been in agreement with St. Augustine that the 'authentic happy life' is 'to set one's joy on [God]',⁴⁷ grounded in and caused by Him. When we search for Joy, though we might pursue other, more earthly, joys, and not God, nevertheless, our wills are 'drawn toward some image of the true joy'.⁴⁸ Yet how do we know to desire the happy life, to search for joy, let alone come to realize it as caused by and rooted in the knowledge and truth of God?

Again, St. Augustine lays a trail for us to follow in the search for the happy life: 'Is it by remembering, as if I had forgotten it and still recall that I had forgotten? Or is it through an urge to learn something quite unknown, whether I had never known it or had so forgotten it that I do not even remember having forgotten it?'.⁴⁹ If joy is being in the presence of God, then Adam, the first man, was the first human to experience joy in Eden. Though that direct experience is severed by the Fall, still, in Adam, as the start and representation of humanity, we inherit or retain the memory of that joy, however dulled or obscured it might be. We would otherwise have 'no love for it unless there were some knowledge of it in [our] memory',⁵⁰ and it is the memory of joy in Eden that shapes and guides our expectation of future, eternal joy in Heaven. The inconsolable secret of the relationship that was broken once upon a time will be redeemed and restored. An examination of Tolkien's attitude toward the age in which he found himself, and a comparison with his contemporaries notes that a 'striking similarity among all these writers [Twain, Eliot, Joyce, Tolkien] is that none manifested a very hopeful attitude toward the human race'.⁵¹ With their deep understanding of the Fall and its subsequent consequences on humanity and creation, Tolkien and Lewis were not very hopeful in human nature on its own, but rather, in God in human nature. What they learned from the eucatastrophe at the center of Christianity, and continue to teach us, is that Eden shows us what we once were; Heaven shows us what we will become.

For Tolkien and Lewis, writing about this *evangelium*, this 'Joy beyond the walls of the world',⁵² meant taking cross and sword and bread and wine and human fellowship out of the usual, sometimes rote, contexts in which we encounter them. The value of entering Faërie, then, of telling stories from its perspective, is that it takes what we already see, hear, taste, smell, and feel, 'the simple or fundamental things' of our everyday world, and makes them 'all the more luminous by their setting',⁵³ restoring them to 'the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity'.⁵⁴ The task left to us – writers and audiences alike – is to 'remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake'.⁵⁵ Sometimes coming awake means remembering a flash of joy, sometimes it means writing or reading a story of a land far, far away, and sometimes it means attending a little more closely to this fantastic present. For, 'in life and art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive'.⁵⁶ Eternity is the not-successive Present. We are trying to capture timelessness in time. As both Tolkien and Lewis realized and so lovingly wrote, we are not bound forever to this creation, or to time, and beyond the walls of the world is 'more than memory'⁵⁷ and more than expectation. Eden is drawn up into Heaven, where we see the fullness of time, the 'beauty so old and so new',⁵⁸ where there is no end to any fairy tale remembered or expected: 'it begins and ends in joy'.⁵⁹

And they lived happily ever after.

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- ¹ Wayne Grudem, 'The Character of God: "Incommunicable" Attributes', *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 169.
- ² St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 226.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.
- ⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 66.
- ⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 453.
- ⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 148.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 244.
- ¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 26.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ¹⁴ *Tree and Leaf*, 87.
- ¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), 16.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1956), 17.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.
- ²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 29.
- ²¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster Inc., 1996), 61.
- ²² *The Weight of Glory*, 30.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster Inc., 1996), 119.
- ²⁵ *The Weight of Glory*, 41
- ²⁶ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 75.
- ²⁷ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 213.
- ²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), 183.
- ²⁹ For this discussion, the terms Faërie, fantasy and the fantastic, myth and the mythical are more or less synonymous.
- ³⁰ C.S. Lewis, 'Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1982), 89.
- ³¹ *Tree and Leaf*, 55.
- ³² 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children', 39.
- ³³ 'Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', 89.
- ³⁴ 'Beowulf', 15.
- ³⁵ *Tree and Leaf*, 47.
- ³⁶ C.S. Lewis, 'On Stories', in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1982), 15.
- ³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 76.
- ³⁸ *Tree and Leaf*, 10
- ³⁹ Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (????), 18.
- ⁴⁰ *Tree and Leaf*, 59
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁴² 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children', 38
- ⁴³ *Tree and Leaf*, 88
- ⁴⁴ *Surprised by Joy*, 16-7.
- ⁴⁵ *Tree and Leaf*, 68-9

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- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45
- ⁴⁷ *Confessions*, 198.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 196,
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.
- ⁵¹ Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997), 26.
- ⁵² *Tree and Leaf*, 69.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59
- ⁵⁴ 'Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', 90
- ⁵⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1992), 75.
- ⁵⁶ 'On Stories', 19.
- ⁵⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Appendix A', in *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 389.
- ⁵⁸ *Confessions*, 201.
- ⁵⁹ *Tree and Leaf*, 72