"Joy beyond the walls of the world":
On the Presence of Sorrow in Eucatastrophe

Micaela MacDougall

In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien names eucatastrophe as perhaps the most important component of fairy tales, saying: "Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it… The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy tale, and its highest function" ("On Fairy Stories" 384). Based on this, one might expect *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's own fairy story, to end in an overwhelmingly joyful eucatastrophe. Of course, there is great joy in the celebration on the Fields of Cormallen, in the coronation of Aragorn, and in the restoration and golden year of the Shire. Yet all this is mixed with sorrow. Gandalf and the elves leave Middle-Earth. Frodo never recovers from his wounds, lives without honor from his own people, and finally departs with the elves. The final chapter presents the separation of Frodo and Sam; the one good that has been constant through the whole story is dissolved, and the reader is left with this grief. So what sort of eucatastrophe is present in *The Lord of the Rings*? And how can this story lead us to a greater understanding of what Tolkien meant by eucatastrophe?

Alison Milbank examines this question from a slightly different angle in Chapter 3, "Paradox and Riddles," of her book *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*. I will focus on the final section of the chapter, in which Milbank looks at the paradoxical ending of *The Lord of the Rings*: she tries to understand the sorrows I have just described specifically in the context of the ending's Biblical allusions. I will first spend some time going over her argument, then explore how her conclusion compares to Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe in "On Fairy Stories."

Since I will refer so often to the Biblical apocalypse, let me first describe what that means. Remove from your mind the popular image of destructive chaos, wide-spread violent death, and generally the end of the world. In fact, the Bible gives nearly the opposite picture,[1] frequently naming the apocalypse "the Year of the Lord's favor." It is when God will restore the world to what it was meant to be. Man shall live peacefully with nature. Humans will no longer oppress the weakest among them, but all will live in harmony and each will enjoy the fruits of his own labor. The picture is not one of destruction and death, but of restoration and flourishing.

With that in mind, I continue to Alison Milbank. Moving on from her analysis of the paradoxical redemption of Middle-Earth, Milbank writes, "The ending of the novel is equally paradoxical… [It] sets up another series of biblical parallels only to deny them the finality of cosmic battle" (108). On the one hand, the White Tree of Gondor may be connected with the Tree of Life in Revelation, Aragorn's marriage to Arwen with the marriage supper of the Lamb, and the scouring of the Shire with prophecies of the Year of the Lord's favor. On the other hand, the appendices reveal Gondor's subsequent fall back into hubristic darkness; unlike Christ, Aragorn's reign will not last forever. And even in the Shire's golden years, Frodo is not honored as the savior that he is, as if the new heavens and the new earth denied kingship to Christ. Again

---

[1] In passages such as Isaiah 60-62, Ezekiel 34, and Hosea 2

and again, the novel paints its ending as like the Biblical apocalypse, yet incomplete and not final.

These paradoxical allusions make the point that humanity on its own cannot succeed at creating a perfect world. Frodo, in his saving of Middle-Earth, and Aragorn, in his inauguration of an apocalyptic reign, are Christ-figures; yet they are significantly unlike Christ insofar as they do not share in the divine nature. Without God, and without the God-man, even humanity's best attempts at renewing the world will lack completeness and finality.

However, Tolkien is doing more than making a point about humanity's capabilities. Thus, Milbank continues: "Tolkien does not suggest both apocalyptic millennium in Aragorn's reign and realized eschatology in the Shire merely to show the limits of human attempts at inaugurating divine justice and human flourishing. They also prepare and precipitate the unease deliberately created by the double ending of the novel" (111). The reference here is to the double ending of the Grey Havens; Frodo goes over the sea with the Elves, while Sam stays behind in the Shire. The unease of this double ending can once again be understood in terms of its Christian allusions. This time, the allusions touch on the unease of the Christian living between Christ's resurrection and the larger resurrection of the Last Judgment. The bookends of these two resurrections exaggerate the unease of the present reality of death. Milbank makes the argument that Frodo and Sam's separation invokes the unease of death, insofar as their deep friendship is a kind of picture of the union of soul and body in resurrection (though of course it is much more than that). She writes, "Frodo hardly seems to have a body at all in the later parts of *The Lord of the Rings*, and even his pains back home in the Shire have a spiritual basis. Sam, on the contrary, is not just a reassuring physical presence but an active agent in the rebuilding of his community, and in forming human relationships" (111). While Frodo becomes more and more spiritual over

the course of his quest, Sam remains firmly tied to the physical world and is heavily invested in such things as cooking, gardening, and getting home after the Ring is destroyed. Thus, their friendship carries the joy of resurrection, when body and soul will be joined in a more perfect union; and their separation carries the very sorrow of death, traditionally defined as the separation of body and soul, which sorrow is exaggerated in the context of resurrection.

So where does all this leave us? I previously said that Tolkien's paradoxical allusions to the biblical apocalypse pointed out humanity's limitations. However, taking those allusions together with the sorrow of Frodo and Sam's separation shows that Tolkien is doing more. He is not just teaching his readers ideas about the apocalypse; he is creating in his readers a desire for a perfect apocalypse. By alluding to the Biblical picture of divine justice and human flourishing, Tolkien calls up the longing that we all have for such a perfect world; by breaking down these allusions, Tolkien leaves that desire unfulfilled and so makes it even stronger. Similarly, by reversing the usual order, giving a picture of death (in Frodo and Sam's separation) after a picture of resurrection (in their friendship), Tolkien both us gives a taste of the joy of the resurrection and leaves our desire for resurrection unfulfilled. Thus, Milbank concludes her argument by writing, "Tolkien's celebration of the 'sudden joyous turn' of a fairy-tale was not so much a realist trope of events turning out well as an anagogical anticipation of the Last Judgement" (112). That is, eucatastrophe is not a perfectly self-contained happy ending, but rather a happy ending that by limiting its happiness, points outside itself to the more perfect happy ending of the Christian apocalypse.

To return briefly, then, to the opening question: how can we understand eucatastrophe, given the sorrow that is present in the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*? Milbank's answer is that the sorrow must be understood specifically in the context of the ending's biblical allusions, that

the sorrow is the mechanism for limiting those allusions and so making eucatastrophe something that points outside of itself.

Milbank develops her conception of eucatastrophe entirely based on The Lord of the Rings, without reference to Tolkien's own description in "On Fairy Stories." The next step in developing her idea would therefore be to compare Milbank's and Tolkien's ideas of eucatastrophe. Three points of comparison come to mind. First, does Tolkien think of eucatastrophe as pointing outside its specific fairy tale? Second, what connection does Tolkien make between eucatastrophe and Christianity? Third, how does Tolkien account for the presence of sorrow in fairy tales, and especially in the endings of fairy tales?

First, in "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien makes it quite clear that he sees fairy tales as pointing outside themselves, doing so especially by means of eucatastrophe. He writes, "In such stories when the sudden 'turn' comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" ("On Fairy Stories" 386). And later, he says, "But in the 'eucatastrophe' we see in a brief vision that … it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" ("On Fairy Stories" 387, italics in original). At this point, let me again emphasize that the way in which fairy tales point outside of themselves is not pedagogical. Tolkien does not say here that fairy tales make us think about what he calls the primary world, but that they give us joy by evoking our deepest desires and by echoing a real-world fulfillment of those desires. This obviously begs the question, what real-world fulfillment? What is the evangelium that eucatastrophe echoes?

And this bring us to the second point of comparison, for Tolkien in fact sees fairy tales as echoing the evangelium of Christianity. Tolkien claims that the Christian gospel has all the

elements of a fairy tale, but that it has surpassed any fairy tale in being historically true. This idea

has been much discussed elsewhere, so I will not elaborate on it now. More important to our

present inquiry is a passage in which Tolkien goes on to say how the Christian fairy tale relates

to all others:

> It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be 'primarily' true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed… The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth… It looks forward… to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the *Gloria*, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently… high and joyous. ("On Fairy Stories" 388)

Not only is the Christian gospel a fairy tale, but it is the fairy tale in which all others are

contained. Any fairy tale, no matter what its story, participates in the Christian fairy tale by the

joy of its eucatastrophe. By its turn to sudden joy, any fairy story gives its reader a taste, an echo,

of that same joy amplified in the primary reality of the Christian eucatastrophe.

I think it's clear Milbank would agree that the smaller joy of any eucatastrophe points to

the fuller joy of Christianity. However, she also claims that sorrow plays the vital role of limiting

the joy of a eucatastrophe, so that the reader can find the fulness of joy in Christianity's

eucatastrophe. Thus, I will close by exploring Tolkien's own thoughts on sorrow in

eucatastrophe.

His main statement on the subject is this: eucatastrophe "does not deny the existence of

dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of

deliverance; it denies (in the face of so much evidence if you will) universal final defeat and in

so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world,

poignant as grief" ("On Fairy Stories" 384). The possibility and existence of sorrow and failure

are "necessary to the joy of deliverance": these create the joy of eucatastrophe. Knowing that

great deeds have failed, and that good men have had sorrow, makes us feel so keenly the joy of

eucatastrophe, which could have been dyscatastrophe, but is not. The possibility of sorrow is exactly what gives us joy. Perhaps this sounds paradoxical, yet we are all familiar with it. Remember Sam's words after waking in Ithilien: "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?" And Gandalf's laughter was "like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 230). It is the expectation of death that makes life so joyous. It is the past loss of merriment that makes Gandalf's laugh contain all the joys that Sam had ever known. Sam's joy is greater for having known sadness, for his joy is precisely that the sadness is coming untrue.

So Milbank says that sorrow limits the joy of eucatastrophe; Tolkien, that sorrow increases the joy of eucatastrophe. I would suggest that these ideas are not contradictory, but complementary. Think of any great painting that makes use of tenebrism (the intense contrast of light and dark). On the one hand, the darkness limits the light insofar as the darkness takes up space, and the light is contained in a smaller area. On the other hand, the darkness increases the light insofar as the contrast between light and dark makes the light seem to shine even more intensely. Joy and sorrow in fairy tales have an analogous relationship. The presence of sorrow may mean that there is less to take joy in, or that joy takes up a smaller portion of the story; but it also means that joy is felt more strongly. On the one hand, the presence of sorrow in eucatastrophe makes its joy incomplete, pointing to the complete joy of the Christian eucatastrophe. On the other hand, this incomplete joy is intensified by coming in the midst of sorrow, and this very intensity of joy also points to the similarly intense joy of the Christian eucatastrophe.

To end on a speculative note: I think this may be exactly the idea that Milbank is getting at, from a different perspective, when she argues that sorrow in eucatastrophe intensifies our desire for a perfect eucatastrophe. The line between joy and the desire for joy is not so clear as we might think; we have seen that Tolkien connects the two, writing that in eucatastrophe "we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire" ("On Fairy Stories" 386). Many of the joys we feel include an element of longing for our joy to be made more complete. Thus, the eucatastrophe of any fairy story points us towards the more perfect, but not yet attained, joy of the Christian eucatastrophe, as Tolkien and Milbank both point out. I would therefore suggest that Milbank gives us one possible way of understanding what Tolkien means when he says that sorrow is necessary to the joy of eucatastrophe. For sorrow does intensify joy, in the common sense of great happiness, and it also intensifies our desire that our joy may be complete and that all sorrow may come untrue; and this desire may itself be felt as a kind of joy.

Perhaps this connection between desire and joy is behind one of the most mysterious, yet also most beautiful passages in *The Lord of the Rings*, which intimately links sorrow and joy. If desire is closely related to joy, it is also closely related to sorrow; if we desire something, we do not have it, and we mourn its absence. I will leave you to continue wondering about the relationship between joy, sorrow, and desire, as I close by reading this passage:

> "And all the host laughed and wept, and in the midst of their merriment and tears the clear voice of the minstrel rose like silver and gold, and all men were hushed. And he sang to them, now in the Elven-tongue, now in the speech of the West, until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness." (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 232)

Works Cited

Milbank, Alison. *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real*. London:

T&T Clark, 2009. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-stories." *Tales from the Perilous Realm*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Harcourt, 2008. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965. Print.