

Inklings of Another World

Mary McDermott Shideler, 1966

I

In every age and culture, men have believed that they were the first in history to understand just what kind of a world this is. We are no exception. We are sure that our physical and biological sciences can show us what nature really is, and that our psychological and social sciences can now define what man really is. Of course we do not have all the details, but the general pattern is clear and our basic methods of study are alleged to be indisputably sound. We believe that our society has demonstrated its maturity by becoming honestly—and even proudly—secular. Either God is dead, or man has become incapable of knowing or believing in him, and Harvey Cox, in *The Secular City*, authoritatively has assured us that "it will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion, or metaphysics will once again be back. They are disappearing forever ..."

But a new element is entering our careful calculations, and is threatening to change them. Into this highly secular, scientific and rational world have come the Nine Walkers who constitute the Fellowship of the Ring: Frodo the hobbit, carrying the great ring of Sauron, and his companions: an elf, a dwarf, a wizard, two men, and three other hobbits (or halflings, as they are sometimes called). And they are not being ignored or laughed at or relegated to the company of children. The three volume fairy story that spins their tale, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, is being read by sophisticated and supposedly cynical adults, and in a number of places—especially colleges—people are gathering to work out the cosmology of Tolkien's Middle-earth, to learn the language of the High Elves, and to

compose music for the songs of Tom Bombadil, Bilbo Baggins, and Galadriel. A friend of mine, walking along a public beach early one morning, found scribbled on the sand in letters two feet high: "O Elbereth, Gilthoniel." It is not uncommon to see the phrase, "Frodo lives!" inscribed on the walls of New York subways. A college freshman learned that her upperclass counselor was snatching every free moment to read the Ring trilogy—which the freshman herself, the previous year, had carried by air to Viet Nam, by road to the northern jungles of Thailand, and on her back for fifteen miles into Nepal. And—perhaps the ultimate accolade!—Tolkien's work is being studied in English literature classes and by graduate students.

On the face of it, such an interest by such people in such a book seems unlikely, if not merely a fad. No doubt some observers of the contemporary scene are writing it off as a new version of Camp, or as just another form of reaction against the automated impersonalities of modern life, or perhaps as a pathological regression to childish fantasies. They may be right. Or they may be wrong. I for one, believe that these and similar interpretations do not probe deeply enough into the questions of how people are responding to *The Lord of the Rings* and certain related books, notably those of Charles Williams, and why their books—most of which were published from ten to forty years ago—are becoming so popular at this particular time, not earlier and not later. I shall begin with Tolkien, whose work is in some sense preparatory to Williams'.

II

The plot of the Ring trilogy is one of the oldest and simplest known to man. A small group of companions undertakes, against long odds, to avert a catastrophe. Specifically, the great ring of Sauron, which controls the other rings and which had been lost for many years, has been found again, and Sauron is trying to regain possession of it so that he may destroy not only mankind, but also elves, dwarves, ents, hobbits, and all the other good and kind and beautiful things of life. Such is the power of the ring

that it could be used to annihilate Sauron himself, but one who does use it will become as evil as he. The only hope, therefore, lies in carrying the ring back to the fires where it was forged, the only place where it can be unmade. But those fires are in the very heart of Sauron's kingdom of Mordor, guarded by orcs and the Nazgûl and Sauron's own all-seeing eye. None the less, the attempt must be made and is made, and *The Lord of the Rings* tells the story in eleven hundred pages of narrative, plus six appendixes and several detailed maps in black and red.

It is a good story and well told, belonging to the type that is sometimes contemptuously dismissed as "escape" literature. But as Tolkien writes in his essay "On Fairy Stories": "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? ... In using Escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter." In C. S. Lewis' essay, "On Stories," he makes a suggestion that enables us to distinguish between these. If one reads a book over and over, returning to it under a variety of circumstances and perhaps over a long period of time, it can be inferred with reasonable certainty that he is not primarily deserting his immediate world, but is escaping into another world: fleeing from the confinement of roofs and walls into the freedom of mountains and forests and stars, or returning from the loneliness of exile to his own country.

Essentially, what Tolkien does for his re-readers is to lead them into a world where they are more at home than they have ever been in any of their homes, and to arouse in them a homesickness for it. His appeal is directly to the imagination and not to the intellect. We do not conclude our reading of the Ring trilogy by trying to determine how the chronology of Middle-earth is related to that of classical Greece, or by seeking funds for an archaeological expedition to locate where the city of Minas Tirith or the house of Rivendell stood. Tolkien's world is compelling because it is internally coherent and therefore intellectually satisfying. It does not

compel us to confuse the world of faërie with the worlds of science or history or religion.

Tolkien's achievement, and it is a rare and prodigious one, is to captivate the imaginations of an astonishing number of modern men and women, of whom a large proportion were brought up to ignore or to despise the works of the imagination. I do not know when the movement to repress imagination began to penetrate our primary and secondary schools—and our homes—as it had already penetrated science and philosophy, but it started before I was in grade school. My friends tell me that their children are still being systematically taught that fairy stories are lies, myths are quaint superstitions, and the imaginary is the unreal—pleasant, perhaps, but unproductive and therefore irrelevant. Apparently these attacks upon our very capacity to imagine have been widely effective. Our imaginations have been suppressed, stifled, thwarted, starved, mocked and cheated, until it is difficult for us to imagine creatively, and when we do, we lack the discipline to use our imagination with real art or skill. We have been trained diligently in the proper use of our intellects and bodies; we have not been trained in perceiving images and relating them to each other, which is as delicate and arduous a business as perceiving and relating ideas in rational thought, or colors and forms in painting, or muscular movements in gymnastics.

We are not primarily rational beings who happen to occupy bodies. We are persons who have physical, intellectual, emotional, and imaginative functions—among others—and if any of these functions is neglected or abused, it will avenge itself. If it is allowed to decay, the products of its decomposition will contaminate the whole organism. If it is buried alive, repressed, it will burst from its grave with a frightening energy.

Ever since Descartes introduced mathematics into philosophy, man's imagination has been increasingly subordinated to his "pure" reason. But I believe it is possible that the increasing popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* may be a sign that man is finally beginning to revolt against this restriction

of his natural functions, and that we may be approaching a new age, of the imagination. While there is no indication so far of an unfortunate trend to deny the authority of reason in its own place, there is substantial evidence that many are beginning to deny it the supreme place that it has claimed for itself during the past four centuries. I am both hopeful and fearful that this is so: hopeful, because the narrowly rational man is at best only half a man, and in the resurgence of the imagination, I see the possibility of a fresh and immensely productive integration of our primitive roots with our intellectual achievements; I am fearful, because the powers of imagination are suddenly being discovered by people who have had little or no training in its discipline, and most of whom, I suspect, have no inkling of how much power they are taking into their hands.

III

The vast potentialities of an age of the imagination are intricately bound up with the complex relationship between imagination and belief. For example, Tolkien's faërie world of Middle-earth is to me imaginable, but not believable. In reading the Ring trilogy, I participate imaginatively in another world that is separate from and alien to what we usually call "the real world," without feeling any urge to integrate my knowledge of the two. On the other hand, I cannot prevent my newly quickened imagination from ranging where it will, and as it stretches its wings and soars, I discover that Tolkien's talk of faërie is a way of talking about something that is neither faërie nor "reality." I begin to have inklings of still another world, which is so related to "reality" that I could believe in it. but not believable. In reading the Ring trilogy, I participate imaginatively in another world that is separate from and alien to what we usually call "the real world," without feeling any urge to integrate my knowledge of the two. On the other hand, I cannot prevent my newly quickened imagination from ranging where it will, and as it stretches its wings and soars, I discover that Tolkien's talk of faërie is a way of talking about something that is neither faërie nor "reality." I begin to have inklings of still another world, which is so related to "reality" that I could believe in it.

This other world can be discussed in terms other than faërie, and I first became aware of it (long before the Ring books were published) in the works of Tolkien's friends, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. These three and several others belonged to an informal group that called itself "the Inklings," and met on Thursday evenings in Lewis' rooms at Magdalen College, Oxford. Their writings are markedly different in style and content, but they illuminate, supplement, and correct each other in fascinating ways and with surprising precision, even when no such interaction seems to have been intended. Thus—again, to me—while Tolkien's world of faërie is imaginable but not believable, the world that I met in Lewis' theological books and articles was initially believable but not imaginable. I assented to it intellectually, but I could not feel myself a part of it. My heart could dwell in Middle-earth, so to speak, while my head believed in the Christian God, but my intellectual and imaginative commitments were at odds. They did not actually conflict, but neither did they interact creatively.

I think it likely that a similar discontinuity between intellect and imagination lies behind the fact that a good many modern men and women find it impossible to believe in a God, much less the God of traditional Christianity. Their education in the faith has been concentrated upon its intellectual and practical aspects, but they have been given almost nothing to prepare them to receive it imaginatively as anything except an arbitrary construction. They were taught to envision a freshly laundered Jesus, who is docile, effeminate, unsure of his own identity, and without one drop of honest Jewish blood in his anemic veins. They were not educated to imagine—sometimes they were educated precisely to not imagine—any forms of worship other than their own (or more probably, their parents'), any other sets of words for transmitting the Word, or any other styles of Christian living. By means of these restrictions upon imagination, not only are they discouraged from the intellectual exploration of their faith, but worse, the natural impulse toward compassion—which is rooted in imaginative appreciation—is forced into a tragically narrow channel.

Another English writer, Charles Morgan, a contemporary of the Inklings—but apparently unknown to them and they to him—has this to say of such deadening of the imagination:

The curse of man, and the reason that civilization after civilization breaks down and rots, is that he allows imagination to stagnate and congeal. He lets the stream freeze over. Art fluidifies it again. A story isn't good because it gives men pleasure or instructs them or imposes an opinion on them or leads to the reform of a moral or social evil. And it isn't good because it does a reader's imagining for him: that's a photographer's job, not an artist's. It is good because it re-enables a man to imagine for himself. It unfreezes the river. After that the river flows on in its own course, godlike or devilish ... Art gets the curtain up, that's all. ... What happens afterwards is a moralist's affair, not an artist's.
[*Sparkenbroke*, pp. 68-69]

Moralists have been known to insist that the river ought to be frozen, lest it overflow its banks or flow in the wrong direction. The danger is real. But the alternative is even more dangerous. When we are protected against imagining unreality and evil, we are prevented from imagining the real and the good, and from perceiving the holy which is the judgment upon reality and goodness.

To repeat: Art raises the curtain, enabling us to imagine new possibilities within our familiar worlds—even new worlds. It brings us to the threshold of belief, and so doing, it can unite intellectual conviction with imaginative participation. Herein lay the genius of the third of the Inklings, Charles Williams. Like Tolkien, Williams displays a world that is alien to "reality," but his world of eternity—unlike Tolkien's faërie—is closely integrated with ours. Like Lewis, Williams presents Christianity in a way that is intellectually coherent and persuasive, but unlike Lewis (in his theological works), he succeeds in drawing us into a world where Christianity is happening, so that we can see and feel what it would be like to live, for

example, in a world that has eternal characteristics as well as temporal ones, as the Christian faith declares that we do.

Thus in the sixth of Williams' seven novels, *Descent into Hell*, the framework of the story is provided by an event that might happen almost anywhere in the "real" world. A group of amateurs puts on a play, and the incidents associated with the production, from the first reading of the script to the effects of the performance upon the cast and the audience, ties the story firmly into the kind of life that most of us ordinarily live. And the characters of the novel are familiar: the temperamental young woman who is given the leading role, her very untemperamental boy friend, and her almost insanely jealous admirer; the author of the play, its efficient producer, and the member of the cast who may not be able to perform because her grandmother is dying.

However, the action of the novel takes place not only in time, but outside it, in the eternity which is not endless time but the absence of time, so that any other time can be contemporary with this one. The stage is built on the spot where four hundred years earlier, a man had been burned to death for his religious convictions, and something of the violence of that event seems to infect the very ground and air of the place. More recently, a workman had committed suicide in one of the then-unfinished houses of the neighborhood, and something of his desperation still lingers in and around it. To the dying woman, time has become transparent so that she can see no reason why her grand-daughter, Pauline, who has been disturbed by the history of the martyr, should not be able to help him in his agony or the suicide in his bewilderment. In eternity, "there is neither before nor after; there is only act": what matters is the relationships that are established, not the time when they were formed or broken. As all lovers know, distance in space is not an insuperable obstacle to the exchange of love; why should we suppose that distance in time should be? Still Pauline is incredulous. How can the martyr receive her help before she has given it? Her grandmother answers, "why do you talk of *before*? If you give, you give to It [the Omnipotence], and what does it care about *before*?" Evident-

ly, nothing. The connection between Pauline and the two men who had died is made—in time and therefore in eternity—or in the eternal present and therefore in the temporal present—which is the point where time and eternity intersect.

Descent into Hell is not only an enthralling adventure story, but intrinsically disturbing, because Williams makes the interaction of time with eternity both imaginable and believable. Therefore, he compels us to choose between seriously believing and seriously disbelieving in it. When he raises the curtain, he invites us not merely to observe the world of eternity-in-time but to enter it, and we must either accept or decline the invitation. Reading the other Inklings—even Lewis in his novels—we can postpone more or less indefinitely the decision to believe or disbelieve, because they speak primarily to either the intellect or the imagination. But with Williams we have no choice but to choose between a world of daily life that is or is not permeated with a timeless grace, and does or does not contain a present glory.

IV

But is the world of our daily life really like the world that Williams delineates? We need to know. Obviously none of us wants to believe in something that is not true, no matter how clearly we can imagine it or how eagerly we hope it is true.. Truth, however, is not a quality belonging to certain things, but a characteristic of certain relationships between ourselves and the world. Our first question should be not "what is the world like?" but "what relationship shall we establish with the world?" There are limits, of course, to the kinds of relationships that the world will permit. We cannot treat persons consistently as things without turning them into impersonal objects or inciting revolt from them. We can grow trees by planting seeds but not mountains by planting pebbles. But within such limits, the world can endure many relationships expressing many interpretations,

and as Williams has noted, "the irony of the universe has ensured that any pattern invented by man shall find an infinite number of facts to support it."

We do not know which of the patterns of interpretation that are available to us is, in an absolute sense, correct. Even if we did, this would not solve our preliminary problem of how we should relate ourselves to the world. Shall we approach it with love, hate or indifference? With curiosity, greed or subservience? Shall we be detached observers or enthusiastic participants, or sometimes one and sometimes the other, and if so, at which times shall we do which? Shall we celebrate life or simply use it? "A rose is a rose is a rose"—no doubt, but what are we going to do with the rose? Leave it on the bush, or pick it? Enjoy or ignore it? Dissect, draw or wear it? We live in a framework of time and space and matter: and other persons: how are we going to approach and relate to them? The question is crucial, because the manner of our approach determines what we shall learn about the world and how we shall live in it.

Williams, Tolkien and Lewis propose that we relate ourselves to the world in a way that will generate the grace and glory that traditionally have been associated with God. And by enabling us to imagine such a process, they enable us to accomplish it. Beyond any denial, this kind of relationship with the world can be created and maintained. It is not easy to do, but neither is it easy to maintain the relationship in which we compel nature and our fellows to serve us, or that in which we detach ourselves from them. Each of these and of all the other possible relationships, produces a different quality of life, and in his novel *The Place of the Lion*, Williams examines some of them.

A young woman, Damaris Tighe, who is studying for her doctorate in philosophy, is shocked to discover that the philosophic concepts she has been dealing with are not remote abstractions or counters for playing a game, but terrifying alternatives that have consequences for her entire life and death. She must choose instantly and irrevocably, but her severely intellec-

tual education has not prepared her to imagine herself as anything but a dispassionate scholar, or the world as anything but a passive object for her study. She has been playing a language game, but life is not in that sense a game, and it catches up with her.

Other characters relate themselves to the world in other ways, and like Damaris, they find that their interpretation of the world determines what becomes of them. Damaris' father had subordinated his whole life to beauty, and when perfect beauty appears to him, he contentedly dies. A couple of their elderly acquaintances, who had tried to possess life, are possessed by it, and one is transformed into a snake, the other crushed to death by the lion. A friend, Quentin, becomes demented when he realizes that things are not necessarily what he has always imagined them to be. And there is Anthony, who loves Damaris, but loves even more that wisdom which lies neither in abandonment nor in safety, but in the balance created by "the perpetual interchange of love," and who therefore can control the lion, the snake, and the lamb.

To some of these people, the world is really a horror. To others, it is really a glory. We are free to choose what relationship we will have with the world, but we are not free not to choose. Life continually pulls us into itself, so that if, for example, we refuse a responsibility that is properly ours, we suffer the consequences of irresponsibility, even though we may not know what your responsibilities were until the results of our neglect swoop down upon us, like the pterodactyl upon Damaris, and begin to claw and tear. Whatever our desires, we are straitly bound within a world whose response to us is not determined solely by its own nature, or by ours, but by the interaction between us. A stone can be used for building material, or as a weapon, a museum exhibit, a weight, or the subject for a poem. What is the stone? A bundle of energy that is capable of performing certain functions, incapable of performing others, and the way we use it will determine what we shall know it to be, and what it and we will become.

If Williams' description is accurate, the world does not in itself contain eternal grace and glory, but neither do we impose these qualities upon it. They are the products of a particular relationship, like the conception of a child by a man and a woman. And these relationships necessarily are concrete and specific. We do not lay hold upon eternity by evading the immediate world of matter and time, but by penetrating it. Every separate moment contains all moments. Every individual event is a door to eternity. But only if we receive it in its full immediacy can we enter an eternal relationship with it. And unless we can imagine the co-inherence of the divine grace with our ordinary worlds, we shall not be able to incarnate it.

V

It is good for us to confront steadily the ugliness in our world, to follow the histories of anti-heroes, to explore the caverns of meaninglessness, and to be confined within the secular city. But eyes that are fully dark-adapted will be blinded by sunlight, and the imagination and intellect that can discern every subtle variation among evils may not be able to discriminate at all between evil and good. As G. K. Chesterton once said: "we are face to face with the problem of a human consciousness filled with very definite images of evil, and with no definite images of good." But neither physically nor mentally is man a nocturnal creature. He is not only able to see light; he hungers for it; and when he finds it, he runs forth to call his friends to see it and share his joy. So it is when the Inklings dazzle our eyes with their appeal to our imaginations and their definite images of good. "Come, look for yourselves. Take and read."

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