J.R.R. Tolkien’s sub-creation theory: literary creativity as participation in the divine creation

María Del Rincón Yohn

ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien is recognized as one of the great literary creators of fantastic worlds. The English author added to his literary work a reflection on the role of the fantasy writer in his theory of sub-creation. This literary theory –exhibited mainly in his essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’ and in his letters– is based on the author’s own cosmovision, clearly influenced by his Catholicism, and contemplates literary creation as an analogy of divine creation. This article deals with the Christian foundation present in the idea of participation in Creation that we find in Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation. It proposes an overview of the main theological questions that support this participation, taking especially into account the contribution that John Paul II makes on this issue in his ‘Letter to Artists’.

1. Introduction

The literary work of the English writer J.R.R. Tolkien has been studied from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, including the theological one. We cannot deny the profound Christian nature of the fictional world presented by the author, especially when he himself stated that ‘The Lord of the Rings is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work’ (Tolkien and Humphrey 2000, 172). We can find, therefore, numerous approaches to J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy writings –especially The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion– that offer an interpretation and analysis of the Christian message present in the basis of his works.

There is no doubt that these exercises in theological interpretation are of interest, as long as they do not assume an allegorical understanding of the text that would be alien to the author’s intention. If we follow the author’s expectations, we could consider these studies that combine Tolkien’s literature and Theology as a ‘mutual enlightenment’, as Gunton points out, in which Literature borrows elements from the Christian tradition, while Theology finds a metaphorical way of expressing itself to humanity (Gunton 2001, 138).
A theological hermeneutic of Tolkien’s literature is, however, not the only possibility of making the work of the English author converge with theology. Although the contents of his works are clearly influenced by the faith professed by the writer, his own understanding of the act of literary creation also offers an interesting object of study. The process of artistic creation may seem, at first sight, to be far from theological interest. However, certain authors—such as Kelly or Coutras—have explored the concept of sub-creation coined by Tolkien from a theological perspective, as it shows the work of the fantasy writer as a participation in God’s act of Creation.

Tolkien was, first of all, a philologist, so we find his reflections on literary creation mainly in his essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’ (Tolkien 2012), originally conceived as a conference on the fantastic literary genre, although his letters (Tolkien and Humphrey 2000) also contain a more informal development on the subject. Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation is not limited, however, to a merely philological approach to the creation of a consistent imaginary world (as the Oxford English Dictionary points out in the definition of subcreation) but manifests a fully theological understanding of literary creation as participation in the divine act of creation. Tolkien sensed that the act of creating new literary worlds (sub-creation) possessed a special interest because of its relationship to a divine origin, an interest not often explored: ‘This aspect of “mythology” – sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world – is, I think, too little considered. Is that because it is seen rather in Faërie than upon Olympus?’ (Tolkien 2012, 37).

The theology of fantasy that Tolkien himself presents in ‘On Fairy-Stories’ touches on different aspects linked to narrative making: the role and mission of the writer in relation to God, the content and structure of the stories, the effect of the stories on the readers…. Tolkien bases his understanding of literary creation (in particular of the fantasy genre) mainly on the fact that the author creates because he is created (Tolkien 2012, 70). And, since addressing the theological foundation of all the elements present in Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation would exceed the capacity of this article, we will analyse in this study his concept of literary sub-creation as a reflection of and participation in divine creation.

To this end, we will examine three essential elements for understanding the British author’s theory of sub-creation: the writer as sub-creator, the writer’s working material and his or her special mission or vocation. These ideas, pointed out by J.R.R. Tolkien perhaps intuitively and without a rigorous theological elaboration, also find their echo in the ‘Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists’ (John Paul II 1999). We will often refer to this text, as it offers a theological reflection on the artist’s work (accentuated by the Pontiff’s own artistic experience) that takes as its starting point the participation of artists in divine creation. This article is therefore situated at an intersection between Art Theory and Theology, wanting to shed some light on an object of interdisciplinary study and also recognizing the limitations that a work of this nature can have.

2. The writer as sub-creator

J.R.R. Tolkien’s strong conviction that man was created by God had tangible consequences in his life, in his academic interest and in his writings. His great appreciation
for nature and human languages are, for example, an expression of this conviction, as is his theory of fantasy. For Tolkien, the literary sub-creator is, as we shall see, a reflection of God the Creator, who possesses the creative capacity because of being created and, more specifically, because of having been created in the image of the Creator.

In order to address the theological foundation of Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation, it is interesting to start, first of all, from his explanation of fantasy. The author uses the word fantasy as a broad term that designates both sub-creative art and the quality of ‘fairy-stories’ (Tolkien 2012), distinguishing it from sub-creation, which would be both the new world created by the writer and the action that gives rise to it. Thus, in ‘On Fairy-Stories’, Tolkien states that the author becomes a sub-creator when he ‘gives life’, through a narrative, to that fantastic world (Faerie) that is to be found in his imagination and that transcends, in a certain way, the limits of the author himself: ‘In such “fantasy”, as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. An essential power of Faerie is thus the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of “fantasy”’ (Tolkien 2012, 37). We see in this way of understanding fantasy how the writer acts as a ‘creator’, actualizing and giving existence to a world and characters that are only a potency in his imagination.

But Tolkien goes a step further by referring to this literary creation with the term sub-creation and emphasises its participatory and derivative character with respect to divine creation: ‘we make in our own measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made’ (Tolkien 2012, 69). In this way, by integrating the Christian doctrine of creation as a foundation in his understanding of fantasy, the author transmits that double dimension that we cannot forget when talking about human creativity from the standpoint of the participation in God’s ability to create: we should both recognize the enormous distance that exists between God and man, and that there is something in our creative capacity that resembles God’s. We will now analyse this duplicity which is present in the theology of Creation and which is also recognised by John Paul II in his ‘Letter to Artists’.

**2.1 Creator and sub-creator**

Let us first clarify what distinguishes these two ways of referring to ‘creation’ as an action. John Paul II, in his ‘Letter to Artists’, takes as his starting point the premise that in artistic works man finds ‘some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you’ (John Paul II 1999, no. 1). For John Paul II, artistic creation is a resonance, a reflection of that act of Creation which belongs to God alone. And in this same way Tolkien also understands it, as he expressed in his poem ‘Mythopoeia’: ‘Man, sub-creator, the refracted light/through whom is splintered from a single White/to many hues’ (Tolkien 2012, 101).

The *Genesis* account itself makes this radical distinction between divine creation and man’s work in its very first words: ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth’ (Gn 1:1). The Hebrew verb used in this first biblical passage –*bará*– has God alone as its subject (see John Paul II 1986, no. 5), thus distinguishing his creation from human activity, which we can refer to as creation only in an analogous way. Tolkien’s use of the word sub-creation is, then, of great accuracy and theological
significance. As Gunton points out, the choice of that term to refer to the artist indicates an essentially theological difference by suggesting that there is only one to whom the act of creation can be attributed, man then being limited to operating on a secondary and lower level (Gunton 2001, 130).

The Catholic tradition has in fact always affirmed that only God can be the subject of the act of creation as such (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2013, I, q.45, a.5) and has also expressed that creating implies making something out of nothing. Although the verb *bará* used in Genesis does not lead directly to this reflection, other biblical texts –especially the second book of Maccabees: ‘look at the heavens and the earth and see all that is in them; then you will know that God did not make them out of existing things; and in the same way the human race came into existence’ (2 Mac 7:28) – make us better understand the scope of the divine act of creation and allow us to speak of *creatio ex nihilo*. The formula of *creatio ex nihilo* has, as Ruiz de la Peña explains, a negative and a positive function. The negative one emphasises that ‘there is nothing that pre-exists the act of creation, motivates it or causes it, outside of God’ (Ruiz de la Peña 1996, 123). It is this negative function that makes it necessary to distinguish between the work of the Creator and that of the creatures. But there is also a positive function that derives from this *ex nihilo* and that is related to God’s communication of being to every creature: ‘He who is conditioned by nothing, not even by nothingness, is the same who conditions everything; he who creates without being conditioned takes upon himself the responsibility for the existence of the universe’ (Ruiz de la Peña 1996, 124).

John Paul II presents these ideas, in his words addressed to artists, highlighting the difference between *creator* and *craftsman*: ‘The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—*ex nihilo sui et subiecti*, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning’ (John Paul II 1999, 1). Man, in fact, participates in this creative power, but his works—even those that we would consider purely fantastic—are always based on that which has been created and on the Creator. George MacDonald, a fantasy author much appreciated by Tolkien, also recognised that man’s creative capacity is not the same as that of the Creator and, in a certain way, opened the way to the possibility of using the term *sub-creation* instead: ‘If we now consider the so-called creative faculty in man, we shall find that in no primary sense is this faculty creative. Indeed, a man is rather *being thought* than *thinking*, when a new thought arises in his mind. He knew it not till he found it there, therefore he could not even have sent for it’ (MacDonald 1885, 4–5). It seems, then, that the Tolkien term of *sub-creation* and its vision of *Fantasy* assumes these two dimensions of creation *ex nihilo*: it radically distinguishes the primary world (the work of Creation) from the secondary world (or sub-creation) and it also recognises a participation in the divine action in the sub-creator.

It is the recognition of this radical distinction between divine and human creation that makes it possible to speak of artists not only as creators, or producers of objects, but also as admirers, as Armendáriz points out in his commentary on the ’Letter to Artists’ (Armendáriz 2006, 60). In this way, Tolkien affirms that the joy experienced in the face of a well-elaborated fantasy—in the face of a sub-creation—refers to the good
news of divine creation: ‘it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium\textsuperscript{10} in the real world’ (Tolkien 2012, 85). The contemplation of beauty and the enthusiasm generated by this encounter with something that transcends and surpasses man especially affects artists who always find a gap between what is intuited and desired and what is finally produced in their work, as John Paul II acknowledges:

All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.

Believers find nothing strange in this: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God. (John Paul II 1999, 6)

The artist has the experience of peering into that abyss of light which, although it shows him his own creative limitation, also fills him with enthusiasm by showing artistic intuition as something that transcends him. It is interesting to think about that enthusiasm of the artist considering the meaning of the original Greek word. In Plato’s Phaedrus, the philosopher uses the verb enthousi\textsuperscript{2}az when describing the shock that occurs in the encounter with beauty. This verb means to live in the god, so it points to a phenomenon that, in a certain way, takes man out of himself to put him in dialogue with a greater reality than he is. From this perspective, artistic intuition can also be an imprint and participation of God himself, and thus the artist who reflects on his artistic experience can find in himself a reflection of God the Creator.

\subsection*{2.2 Image of the Creator}

Going back to the Genesis account, the inspired words also remind us of the enormous dignity of man and his participation in God’s being: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him’ (Gn 1:27). The theme of the imago Dei is key to understanding human nature and action, and plays a central role in Tolkien’s understanding of how literature works. The meaning of these words has also been studied in relation to the divine words of the preceding verse: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ (Gen 1:26) and to those of the ninth chapter referring to man after the fall for sin: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind’ (Gn 9:6). The words of Genesis point to a similarity between God and his masterpiece—man—which has been interpreted from many different positions\textsuperscript{11}. Before addressing the understanding of the imago Dei in Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation, we can take as a starting point on this issue what the International Theological Commission states as a general guideline in the document Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God:

\begin{quote}
[T]he whole of man is seen as created in the image of God. This perspective excludes interpretations which locate the imago Dei in one or another aspect of human nature […] [T]he Bible presents a vision of the human being in which the spiritual is understood to be a dimension together with the physical, social and historical dimensions of man. (International Theological Commission 2004, no. 9).
\end{quote}
And so, even as we may now refer to the points where Tolkien’s notion of sub-creation sees this image of God, we must not forget that the divine imprint can be found in the totality of the person.

Tolkien has an eminently Catholic way of thinking that leads him to understand literary creation as a participation in the divine creating power and also makes him fearless in the face of man’s possibility of abusing it: ‘Abusus non tollit usum. 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’ (Tolkien 2012, 69).

Tolkien states that the sub-creator truly participates in God’s act of creation, following a whole theological tradition that accepts Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of participation in God’s being (Aquinas 2010, ST, I. q.75, a. 5). As Sanz summarises, ’[t]he Thomistic metaphysics explains that creatures participate in being and also in doing, so that there is a creatural working, a participation in the working of God’ (Sanz Sánchez 2010). Tolkien manages to express in a particularly suggestive way man’s participation in God’s act of creation and the great dignity he possesses precisely because he is imago Dei in his poem ‘Mythopoeia’:

Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act: [...] Man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
 [...] The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we’re made. (Tolkien 2012, 101)

We can see how Tolkien understands that the sub-creative act participates ontologically in the divine act of creation and that man can create precisely because he was created in the image of the Creator.

Thus, creativity, artistic ability, is understood by Tolkien as a participation in the divine action that highlights the special dignity of man, imago Dei. This understanding of the sub-creator proposed by Tolkien reveals the eminently Catholic roots of the writer, in contrast to the Anglican framework which surrounded him. Yannick Imbert’s criticism of Tolkien’s theory of fantasy from the perspective of Reformed theology is particularly interesting. This author states that the implicit starting point of Tolkien’s theory is situated in the Thomistic analogy of being and thus proposes a re-evaluation of sub-creation from the Reformed position, denying the ontological analogy and replacing it with an epistemological analogy. This same author concludes that from this re-evaluation, Fantasy would not be, as Tolkien understands it, an ontological response to the Creator, but an ethical activity in which the sub-creator would proclaim God’s creation and the loyalty or autonomy of man (Imbert 2014, 141). In this way, Imbert ends up completely reversing the theory of sub-creation, to the point of denying Tolkien’s own interpretation.
In Tolkien’s conception, man recognises that he is the image of God in his own creative capacity, an idea that Chesterton – another Catholic writer in an Anglican society – also held: ‘All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot even talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature. […] This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature’ (Chesterton 2007 29). These words of Chesterton bring us back to that dichotomy, mentioned above, which John Paul II has taken up in his ‘Letter to Artists’. This author also identifies this peculiar issue of the _imago Dei_ with creative capacity:

Through his ‘artistic creativity’ man appears more than ever ‘in the image of God’, and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous ‘material’ of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him. With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power. (John Paul II 1999, no. 1)

Having understood how Tolkien’s sub-creator participates in God’s act of creation, it might be interesting to analyse now that ‘matter’ used by the writer in order to sub-create. We will proceed to examine how imagination plays an important role in the act of sub-creation. The imagination, or the ability to form mental images of things not present, is one of the aspects of human nature that have been studied as a sign of how the _imago Dei_ is reflected in man and, although it can be approached as a characteristic of the sub-creator, we will analyse it in the following section, looking at it from its relationship with the matter of sub-creation.

### 3. The matter of sub-creation

Tolkien’s vision of sub-creation establishes a close relationship between divine creation and the matter with which the writer works. The sub-creator does not only sense his participation in God’s act of Creation when creating a secondary world, but also perceives the traces of the Creator in the matter out of which he starts sub-creating and in the personal qualities he or she has to bring into play. But which is the matter of Fantasy? We could think that words are the primary matter of fantasy storytelling if we confront this artistic form with other arts, such as sculpture or painting. Certainly, Fantasy requires words, but those words are rather the instrument used to express something that comes before. It is difficult to make a precise metaphysical analysis of any artistic form, and the subject of Fantasy can lead us to a discussion that exceeds the objective of this article\(^\text{13}\). It will therefore be enough to echo Genette’s analysis of the Aristotelian poetics to limit our analysis of Tolkien’s sub-creation:

Aristotle’s response is clear: there can be no creation by way of language unless language becomes a vehicle of mimesis, that is, of representation, or rather of the simulation of imaginary actions and events; unless language serves to invent stories, or at least to transmit stories that have already been invented. Language is creative when it places itself at the service of fiction […]. For Aristotle, the poet’s creativity manifests itself not at the level of verbal form but at the level of fiction, that is, the invention and arrangement of a story. (Genette 1993, 6–7)
We can then move on to consider that the actual matter of literary creation is not language or words, but mimesis or representation of reality. In order to properly understand the relationship of fiction and fantasy with that which is created, we cannot forget that art doesn’t limit itself to imitate reality (not even the most realistic art seeks that), but, as Maritain points out, starting from the pre-existing reality, it tries to generate a new reality:

Art, then, remains fundamentally inventive and creative. It is the faculty of producing, not of course ex nihilo, but from a pre-existing matter, a new creature, an original being, capable of stirring in turn a human soul. This new creature is the fruit of a spiritual marriage which joins the activity of the artist to the passivity of a given matter. Hence in the artist the feeling of his peculiar dignity. He is as it were an associate of God in the making of beautiful works; by developing the powers placed in him by the Creator – for ‘every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’ – and by making use of created matter, he creates, so to speak, at second remove. Operatio artis fundatur super operationem naturae, et haec super creationem. (Maritain 1935, 86–87)

Maritain takes the words of St Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas, ST, I, q. 45, a. 8) to highlight the character of sub-creation –second degree creation, in his words– which belongs to the artist. In fact, the artist does not create a different reality, but limits himself to sub-creating, modelling and giving new forms to the raw material of Creation from a perspective that always reflects the image of that Primary world, as Segura points out: ‘whatever the setting and the place where the story is set, the actions and the points of view will always be human, because the writer is human, and in inventing he does nothing but create in his own image and likeness, being as he is the image and likeness of a Creator’ (Segura 2015, 45).

We could think that Fantasy, as a ‘sub-creative art which plays strange tricks with the world and all that is in it’ (Tolkien 2012, 67), does not maintain that strong connection with the Primary World, as other literary genres do. However, Tolkien asserts that this submission of sub-creation to the Primary World is not a slavery for Fantasy, but a grateful recognition of the logic that permeates the world: ‘[Fantasy] certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; […] The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. […] For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard 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’ (Tolkien 2012, 69). As opposed to those who accuse Fantasy –or literary fiction– of fuelling an escapist attitude, Tolkien makes it clear that the writer does not seek to escape, but fully manifests his knowledge and love for the Primary world: ‘Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give’ (Tolkien 2012, 73). Starting from the primary world, the sub-creator can build his fantasy, not without facing the difficulty of achieving that ‘appearance of reality’ to which all fiction aspires. The sub-creator, therefore, will try to produce that secondary world with the intention of filling it with realism, as Tolkien indicates: ‘every sub-creator […] hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it’ (Tolkien 2012, 85).
In this sense, we can also understand better Tolkien’s already quoted words: ‘We make still by the law in which we’re made’ (Tolkien 2012, 101). We pointed out earlier the way in which man’s creative capacity responded to this law of creation, but we can also approach the world and man as objects on which stories are based from this same perspective. The world that has come out of God’s hands has an intelligibility that man can grasp since it is not arbitrary, but has been created according to the wisdom of God (see Ws 9:9), according to the Logos, the Word Incarnate (see Jn 1:1- and Col 1:16–17). Man, created in the image of God, also participates in this creative wisdom, and is therefore capable of building these secondary worlds:

God created man in his image, granting to this image three gifts: a mind directed towards the good, the gift of reason and wisdom, and the gift of aesthetic appreciation. Man is meant to be the wisdom of the world, just because he participates in the Logos; he is also meant to be the artist of the world, because he can imbue it with beauty. […] because he has been created in the image of God, he is called to create. (Bulgakov 1934, 175)

Tolkien states that a greater alignment with the world’s reason, with its logos, allows the sub-creator to produce better Fantasies. Therefore, when the author presents the sub-creator as ‘refracted light’, he manages to combine a multitude of meanings: the sub-creator participates in the creative power of God, presents through his work a reflection of Creation and also becomes an image of Christ, ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things’ (Col 1:15–16). As the sub-creator works with the matter from the Primary World, from the reality created for Christ, through Christ and in Christ (Col 1:16), we can claim, with Tolkien, that a well-crafted Fantasy becomes a ‘far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world’ (Tolkien 2012, 85), as it gives a glimpse of the Wisdom that permeates the Creation.

We can thus see how Tolkien understands sub-creation in view of Creation in the Logos, Whose Incarnation and Redemption enlighten the whole world. In the epilogue ‘On Fairy-Stories’, Tolkien explains that the narratives have been sanctified insofar as the Word (the Logos) has become History: ‘The Evangelium has now abrogated legends; it has hallowed them’ (Tolkien 2012, 87). And so, says the author, sub-creation’s longing and aspirations –the creation of a world with internal consistency of reality– have been brought to their fullness in Creation (Tolkien 2012, 85). And so, says the author, sub-creation’s longing and aspirations –the creation of a world with internal consistency of reality– have been brought to their fullness in Creation (Tolkien 2012, 85). Therefore, as Segura indicates, ‘in the case of Tolkien, the linguistic root of his inspiration […] allows us to speak of a link between words (lógoi) and the creative design that stories manifest (their lógos). Since the meaning of lógos is both word and design, […] it can be said that good stories are an echo of the Logos in which the world was created’ (Segura 2015, 49).

We may think that this relationship between the wisdom of creation and the literary work is somewhat weak in the case of fantasy. Indeed, it could be said that works of fantasy, because they are built on the basis of worlds and characters that do not exist in the primary world, would not enter into the frontiers of sub-creation, since they do not start from Creation, but seek to create something other than what came out of God’s hands. However, Tolkien rejects this apparent opposition between Fantasy and
Creation and affirms that this mode of literary sub-creation participates more purely in divine action: ‘That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that indeed is possible) is a virtue not a vice. Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent’ (Tolkien 2012, 62).

Tolkien considers fantasy as a purer form of art because he understands that these possible worlds contribute to better manifest the power of God. In 1954, Tolkien replied to a letter from Peter Hastings, manager of a Catholic bookshop in Oxford. Hastings argued that, in The Lord of the Rings, the author had overstepped some metaphysical boundaries, taking paths that God had not used. Tolkien, in his response, expresses his appreciation for Fantasy, presenting it as a sign of God’s infinite power:

I should have said that liberation ‘from the channels the creator is known to have used already’ is the fundamental function of sub-creation, a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited [...] I am not a metaphysician; but I should have thought it a curious metaphysic [...] that declared the channels known (in such a finite corner as we have any inklings of) to have been used, are the only possible ones, or efficacious, or possibly acceptable to and by Him! (Tolkien and Carpenter2000, 188–189)

The fact that a secondary world has a different way of being from the created world does not diminish its value. Tolkien’s perception of the possibility that God might have created everything in a different way finds a special response in the hands of St. Thomas Aquinas. The philosopher and theologian teaches that God is the source of all that can be preached about being, of all that is actual and potential (Aquinas, Quaestiones disputatae de potentia, q.3, a.2), so it would not be wrong to say that fantasy also comes from God’s creative act.

In this way, we understand Tolkien’s continuous assertion that myths (stories) are not lies and, if they have been built with skill and honesty, they meet only the limits of man’s finitude. Fantasy, therefore, has the same capacity to manifest the work of Creation when the sub-creator is honest and not guided by selfish interests. In the same letter to Peter Hastings, Tolkien adds a personal note that helps us to contemplate divine Creation through fantasy: ‘I would claim [...] to have as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to “bring them home”’ (Tolkien and Humphrey2000, 194).

This confession by Tolkien himself can serve to close this section on the matter of sub-creative art by linking it to the purpose towards which he directs his sub-creative endeavours. The writer looks for the traces of truth, goodness and beauty present in the created world and presents them to the reader through fantastic forms. We cannot fail to refer, briefly, to imagination as an ability with an essential role in the sub-creative task. This faculty of forming mental images of things not present to the external senses is also an image of God’s creative mode, as MacDonald states: ‘The imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God. Everything of man must have been of God first’ (MacDonald 1885, 3). When Tolkien uses the term Fantasy, he does so by combining the original meaning of the word imagination (power to form mental images) and its derived meaning, given in an equivocal way, which points towards
unreality or liberation from the control of facts. Tolkien assures us that success in the elaboration of a satisfactory Fantasy is found in the degree of imagination. Thus, when the author’s capacity to perceive these mental images and control the scope of their implications has strength and vivacity, it can lead him to a beautiful and effective expression (Tolkien 2012, 61).

If we refer to the words of John Paul II on the action of the Holy Spirit – Creative Spirit – in the artist and put them in dialogue with these ideas derived from Tolkien’s conception of sub-creation, we can think that artistic inspiration has an effect on the imagination: ‘the divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and he awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art’ (John Paul II 1999, no. 15). In this way the Fantasy writer truly becomes a sub-creator, participating in the divine act of creation by his or her abilities and actions.

4. The writer’s vocation

Tolkien concludes his reflection on fantasy by looking at the responsibility of the artist who recognises himself as a sub-creator. Although it is true that the English writer discovers the trace of the Creator in his creative capacity and in every story he writes, and he also knows that the event of the Incarnation has brought every myth and story to its fullness, it does not escape his understanding that creation is in statu viae (CEC 302) and that man was appointed by the Creator as master of all earthly creatures, so he might use them to God’s glory (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 12). In this way, Tolkien interprets his literary vocation from God’s command to man to dominate the earth (Gen 1:28), as a way of enriching the work of creation:

Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused. But in God’s kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. […] The Christian has still to work […]. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. (Tolkien 2012, 87)

Tolkien’s approach to his task as a literary sub-creator is in perfect harmony with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the mission of Christians in the world. From his youth, the writer had the intuition that through his artistic work, for which he felt particularly qualified, he could ‘be a partner in the work of bringing divine creation to perfection’ (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 67). For example, in a letter he wrote from the French trenches, we see how Tolkien perceived that his talent – and that of his friends who made up the society they called TCBS (‘Tea Club, Barrovian Society’) – was an instrument for guiding the world back to God:

The greatness I meant was that of a great instrument in God’s hands – a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things […]. What I meant […] was that the TCBS had been granted some spark of fire […] that was destined to kindle a new light, or, what is the same thing, rekindle an old light in the world; that the TCBS was destined to testify for God and Truth in a more direct way even than by laying down its several lives in this war. (Tolkien and Carpenter 2000, 10)
This letter written by Tolkien in 1916 contains, in a way, the germ of his later reflection on artistic creation. The author acknowledges having received ‘a spark of fire’ destined to ignite a light in the world; he perceives in himself a divine gift (which we have already referred to when dealing with inspiration) that moves him to spread this light he receives from God (let us remember the verses of ‘Mythopoeia’: ‘Man, sub-creator, the refracted light/through whom is splintered from a single White/to many hues’). We could therefore say that Tolkien was aware of having received that vocation to beauty referred to by John Paul II in his ‘Letter to Artists’:

In a very true sense it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of ‘artistic talent’. And, certainly, this too is a talent which ought to be made to bear fruit, in keeping with the sense of the Gospel parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14–30).

Here we touch on an essential point. Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole. (John Paul II 1999, no. 3)

Tolkien understood that his peculiar way of delving into languages and stories ought to have that evangelizing echo, and that his sub-creative art was called to point to that Light that floods the world. The author sees in fantasy a particularly effective vehicle for this purpose, since the peculiar joy derived from the belief in the secondary world can only be explained as ‘a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality of truth. […] We see in a brief version that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world’ (Tolkien 2012, 85). As Fendt (2019) points out, this concept of artistic creation that Tolkien upheld leads to a sacramental understanding of the work of art: because it is something in itself and because it is a sign of something else, sub-creation becomes a way of engaging with what is transcendent to creation, with God himself (Fendt 2019, 68). This statement, which may seem too complex, also finds an echo in the poetic work of John Paul II, The Roman Triptych, which shows the ability of works of art to point to their deepest origins:

When Michelangelo left the Vatican,
he left behind a polychromy,
the key to which is ‘image and likeness’.
Read in this key, the invisible becomes visible.
Pre-sacrament. (John Paul II 2003, 18)

This epiphanic character of artistic creation is what allows us to speak of a certain mission or vocation of artists. As a spark of fire received—referring to the way Tolkien expressed it to his colleagues at the TCBS—, artistic capacity entails the mission of sharing it, as John Paul II also points out in the dedication of his letter to the artists: ‘To all who are passionately dedicated to the search for new “epiphanies” of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world’ (John Paul II 1999). The Second Vatican Council recognised the special value that art in general and literature in particular have for the life of the Church in this regard. As stories share different experiences and desires, they can ‘elevate human life’ (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 62) and ‘do very much to elevate the human family to a more sublime
understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, and to the formation of considered opinions which have universal value. Thus mankind may be more clearly enlightened by that marvelous Wisdom which was with God from all eternity, composing all things with him, rejoicing in the earth, delighting in the sons of men’ (no. 57).

This is no small mission. As Pope Francis said in his past message for the Day of Social Communications, ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit, every story […] can become inspired, can be reborn as a masterpiece, and become an appendix to the Gospel. […] Each of us knows different stories that have the fragrance of the Gospel, that have borne witness to the Love that transforms life’ (Francis 2020, no. 4). The artist’s mission is therefore to reflect the light perceived in creation in order to share it with people. Tolkien recognised in himself a gleam of truth, and knew how to find and show a path leading to the source of light through fantasy. And he did so not only through the exercise of his task as a writer, but also in his scholarly work, as we have seen in analysing certain aspects of Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation outlined in ‘On Fairy-Stories’.

Walter Hooper, who had been secretary and friend of C.S. Lewis (a great friend of Tolkien), recalls a meeting he had with Pope John Paul II. After recalling the then deceased Lewis, the Pope concluded his interview with the following comment: ‘C.S. Lewis knew what his apostolate was. And he did it!’ And this compliment, Hooper acknowledges, can also be applied to Tolkien: ‘Lots of people might know what their apostolate is, but he did it. And that brings in Tolkien’s conscience. He was driven by conscience. Tolkien and Lewis both felt that if they could do it, they ought to do it’ (Hooper and Pearce 2001, 194). Our author was well aware of the mission he had received, and as he told his friends, ‘in making a myth, in practising “mythopoeia” and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a story-teller … is actually fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light’ (Carpenter 1978, 43).

5. Conclusion

This article has addressed the concept of sub-creation coined by Tolkien in his theory on Fantasy from the standpoint of the author’s understanding of literary action as a participation in divine creation. By putting Tolkien’s literary theory of sub-creation into dialogue with other theological texts and the Magisterium of the Church, we have been able to analyze its deep implicit theological background.

Tolkien’s literary theory is built on the depth of his Catholic thought and actions, and so the theory of sub-creation manifests the truths of the Christian faith about Creation. Thus, we can say that Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation stems from the principle that we humans participate in God’s ability to create because we are created in His image and likeness. According to the author, literary creation is always a sub-creation that has its origin in the created reality and that refers to the Creator.

The author also understands that fantasy participates not only in this act of creation, but also follows the logic of Creation. In this way, Tolkien understands that the sub-creator becomes the refracted light of the One and Triune God. Finally, both the theory of sub-creation and the action of the writer suggest that this participation of divine action and divine logic is not only oriented to the enjoyment of the artist, but also
carries with it a certain sense of mission. Tolkien therefore understood that the sub-creator receives a light destined to illuminate the path of men to lead them to the first light, which is God.

Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation reveals a great theological depth which, of course, can be approached from many different perspectives. The present article has tried to show, within its ability, the greatness and theological depth of Tolkien’s thought by putting it into dialogue with some theological themes and with texts of the Magisterium. Tolkien’s short essay, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, still contains, as we can see, many other aspects worthy of analysis from the point of view of Religious Studies and Theology. A theological approach to Tolkien’s literary theory can offer all artists and writers who look into that abyss of light to which John Paul II refers a new way of looking at the world and at themselves. A new way of looking that could bring light to a world that sometimes seems to be in darkness.

Notes

1. Although the author himself has expressed the strong influence of Christianity on his work, there are also some studies and criticisms that seem to deny or contradict the idea of a Christian content in his works. For an approach to this question, see Pearce (2000, chapter 7) and Coutras (2016, 7–10).

2. Avoiding a naïve concordance, which Tolkien himself rejected as part of his literary style (Tolkien and Humphrey 2000, 262), we can find numerous theological studies which analyse the elements of the Catholic Creed glimpsed in the Middle-Earth through the veil of fiction. Thus, for example, Caldecott (2015) and McIntosh (2017) have analysed Creation in Tolkien’s work; McGrath (2001) and Gunton (2001) look at the elements referring to the Passion and Redemption, and Coulombe (2001) at the ecclesiological and sacramental vision in The Lord of the Rings.

3. In his prologue to The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien stated that allegory and applicability start from opposite points, although they often seem to be confused: the former is due to the author’s intentional dominion, while the latter lies in the reader’s freedom (Tolkien 1968, 11).

4. Odero points out that this is how Guardini and Moeller understood it, convinced that if, as John Paul II affirms, ‘man is the way for the Church’ (1997, 4-III, 43), the theologian cannot refrain from discovering those paths revealed in literature (Odero 1998, 31–32).

5. Many of these works address Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation from a theology of the arts. See, for example, Kelly (2002) or from an aesthetic approach to theology in dialogue with von Balthasar’s ideas see Coutras (2016) and Morrow (2017).

6. The text of the essay, originally conceived as a lecture given at the University of St Andrews in 1939, has subsequently been published alongside other writings by the author in Tree and Leaf. In this article I will quote the text from the Harper Collins digital edition (Tolkien 2012).

7. ‘Specifically J. R. R. Tolkien’s word for: the action or process of creating a fully realized and internally consistent imaginary (or ‘secondary’) world’ (Oxford English Dictionary). https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/subcreation

8. I will not dwell on the literary differences between fairy-stories, fantasy and mythology. Although Tolkien’s general ideas about literary creation can be understood in a broad sense – if we understand that all good literary works create in some way a plausible world – Tolkien is explicitly referring to works of a particular genre. Works belonging to the genre of fairy tales, as he understands them, share certain similarities, especially an action set in an imaginary world and a story with a happy ending or euchatastrophe.
For a structured development on this question framed in the perspective of the metaphysics of creation, see (Sanz Sánchez 2007).

Later, in the section on the writer’s vocation, we will develop this idea of the ‘echo of the evangelium’ to which Tolkien refers in his text.

A synthesis of the various interpretations can be found in Ruiz de la Peña (1988, 41–44).

The translation of Sanz’s text is mine.

Gutiérrez’s article may shed some light on this issue. Although it focuses on audiovisual fiction, it points to the metaphysical and epistemological foundations present in fiction. See (Gutiérrez Delgado 2018).

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Notes on contributor

Maria Del Rincón Yohn has a Doctorate in Audiovisual Communication from the University of Navarra, and graduated in Theology from the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. She is a professor of Communication at the International University of La Rioja, and guest professor at the University of Navarra. Her scientific research has focused on film theory, narrative and audiovisual aesthetics; its informative interest regards identity in relation to culture and the humanities.

ORCID

María Del Rincón Yohn http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2026-2027

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