

2022

Hope and Wonder in the Wasteland: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction as Tolkienian Fairy Story

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Recommended Citation

Mac Laughlin, Alfredo J. (2022) "Hope and Wonder in the Wasteland: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction as Tolkienian Fairy Story," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol14/iss2/6>

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INTRODUCTION

It may seem counterintuitive to speak of post-apocalyptic fiction as a genre bound to elicit in its audience such positive reactions as wonder and hope. Even less may one expect these stories to testify to the richness and ultimate goodness of reality. The expression “post-apocalyptic” brings to the imagination roving gangs, power-struggles over scarce resources, lawless violence to be countered only with more violence, abuse, exploitation, cannibalistic mutants, and a general decay of civilization into a selfish, moral-less state of nature: a world turned gladiatorial circus. One might expect the audience for such stories to be one attracted simply by the exotic carnage depicted in them. There is, indeed, some truth to this picture; but taking this as the complete truth underestimates the audience, the depths of meaning, and the aesthetic experience that arises from watching, reading, and playing such stories. It is this aesthetic experience, I would argue, that has really garnered the interest, fascination, even the loyalty of its audience, far beyond what could be expected from the “guilty pleasures” of a few B-movies from the eighties.

Cultural/literary scholarship has quickly acknowledged the growing importance of this genre, that can be dated as far back as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), and which has mushroomed in the last four decades.¹ The popularity and cultural significance of the genre is tacitly acknowledged, in that few scholars, if any, indicate any need to defend or justify this subject of research at the beginning of their discussions.² Scholarly analyses, however, have focused rather narrowly on the more negative cultural and sociological implications of the genre, which is thus almost exclusively regarded as a “pressure valve” (Määttä, 429) indicating social fears, anxieties, paralyzing nostalgia, or oppressive or dehumanizing conditions.³ The near complete conceptual dominance of this approach, while probably unintended, does raise some problems. The more general one is that the absence of alternative models for analysis tends to box in later analyses, so that what were formulated as partial explanations of a complex phenomenon end up being regarded as the go-to, *de facto* exclusive conceptual framework. In practice, I will argue, this leads to a mostly distorted view of the creative process and aesthetic value of post-apocalyptic narratives, which are then quickly regarded as primarily (or “only”) a pressure valve for human anxieties.

¹ Jerry Määttä (2015) mentions no less than ten surveys attempting to map the most significant Anglophone works.

² In this, scholarship has demonstrated significant progress from the times in which Tolkien had to dedicate a whole essay to defend the legitimacy of the scholarly analysis of the fantasy genre.

³ Määttä himself, while surveying these views, does express some degree of skepticism about them. This point is examined in detail in Section 3, *Escape*.

A more particular problem is that, as such analyses focus naturally on the sociological and cultural (and occasionally ethical) implications, the genre still lacks a proper, straightforward analysis of the aesthetic/artistic value of the stories *as such*, that is, as stories that are appealing because of their fascinating settings and rich opportunities for plot and character development, on which any derivative possibilities for psychological and moral benefit rest.⁴ Thus, I want to propose here a novel way of looking at them, by applying the framework introduced by J.R.R. Tolkien in his celebrated essay “On Fairy Stories,” which has become a *tour de force* in present-day philosophical discussions on the existential value of fantasy.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s unassuming, sometimes poetic essay/lecture “On Fairy Stories” (given first as the 1939 Andrew Lang lecture, published for the first time in 1947; hereon *OFS*) accomplished two significant achievements. First, it managed to breach, almost singlehandedly, the shield wall that literary criticism had raised, unwittingly perhaps, around the fantasy genre, and which had rendered the genre as unworthy, not only of serious critical consideration, but even of being read by grownups (Northrup 2004, Johnston 2011). Secondly, in identifying some *roles or functions* of fairy stories (while avoiding a narrow definition of the genre), Tolkien provided a very powerful interpretive key, that—Tolkien being Tolkien, and refusing to be constrained by the narrow, self-imposed limits of his discipline—plays more at the philosophical level of analysis than the critical/literary.

Speaking at a time in which fantasy was consistently looked down by the scholarly establishment, and was deemed by society as only worthy of being read to children (and only for utilitarian/moralistic reasons), Tolkien defended its aesthetic, literary and existential worth for readers across the board. To do so, he identified four functions or effects of fairy stories: *Enchantment*, *Recovery*, *Escape* and *Consolation* (or “Eucatastrophe”). Enchantment speaks of their primary function as fairy stories: to draw the reader⁵ *into* the story, and provide them with the chance to live for a while, imaginatively (through what Tolkien calls “literary belief”) in a “sub-creation,” a fictional world (*OFS* 140). Provided this effect is achieved through the author’s literary skill, other effects may follow. Recovery speaks of the ability of fairy stories, both ancient and new, to help us shake off our habituation to a reality that, while essentially wonderful, has become trite and routine and uninteresting. Escape speaks of the power of fairy stories to provide

⁴ It is possible that this second problem may be arising in fact out of self-imposed strictures of literary criticism, which perhaps regards a straightforward aesthetic analysis as something outside of its province. There is a parallel here with how Tolkien had to rescue *Beowulf* “as an artistic masterpiece,” when it was being regarded exclusively as an object of philological and historical value.

⁵ As I will be using, a bit indistinctly, examples from films, TV shows, video games and written text, the terms “reader,” “player” and “audience” will have to be chosen a bit idiosyncratically, to fit the closest example without becoming burdensome. They should not be understood as exclusionary.

respite from a reality that may have become too oppressive and hard for a person to deal with. Finally, *Eucatastrophe* expresses the existential function of the “good ending,” the quasi-cathartic experience of being (imaginatively) present to the outcome of the protagonists’ persevering through strife and hardships, and this outcome being ultimately good and worthwhile.

Throughout, but especially in this last point, Tolkien intimates the metaphysical, moral, and sometimes theological underpinning of such stories. In proposing that the world (particularly the natural world) can be a perpetual source of wonder, Tolkien reflects the Christian conception of the world as *creation*. A world in which the strife (and frequently, the sacrifice) of its characters manages to ultimately overcome evil and despair is a world that is ultimately *good*. What this, of course, reveals about our *actual* world has been the subject also of much ink; I will try to summarize the main points below.

This framework provides the opportunity for rich philosophical reflection, not only circumscribed to the Fantasy genre, but capable of fruitful analogical application. Assuming that Tolkien’s framework holds up, there is no reason to think that fantasy stories would be the *exclusive* locus for Recovery, Escape and Consolation. Tolkien’s claims amount to establishing fantasy stories as *privileged* places, so that those with a liking for such stories will find their sense of wonder consistently renewed and so forth. What I propose here is that, despite external dissimilarities, post-apocalyptic stories are at heart very much like fairy stories, and as such also elicit, in a powerful manner, Enchantment, Recovery, Escape and Eucatastrophe.⁶

If this is so, do post-apocalyptic stories then share also a similar outlook on the richness, wonder and ultimate goodness of reality, implied in Tolkien’s analysis? My answer is that, for the most part, they do, but in complex and roundabout ways. This answer will be supported by briefly examining a number of motifs and “symbol clusters” of strong religious meaning, which permeate some of the most celebrated of these stories.

SOME QUICK-AND-DIRTY DEFINITIONS

A. POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION

The growing popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction as a genre makes it unnecessary to preface the subject with lists of canonical examples. When it comes to attempting a definition of the genre, though, scholars are often surprisingly reluctant and evasive, at times because of the suspicion that attempts to define one’s subject

⁶ Tolkien capitalizes these terms. I will also capitalize them in this article, not to signify any preeminent ontological status, but to indicate when I am using these terms in their technical Tolkienian meaning.

involve some form of hubris or conceptual imperialism on one's part, and more commonly because marginal cases and the interpenetration of genres make definitions imperfect and blurry around the edges.⁷ The former objection poses philosophical questions beyond the scope of this paper, but to respond to the latter one needs only to remember Aristotle's happy warning, that we should look for that degree of precision that the nature of the subject at hand admits (*Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3). Even imperfect definitions are more helpful than no definition at all.

Thus, I propose to define post-apocalyptic fiction as ***any narrative that takes place after the collapse (universal or local) of civilization, in a world in which the population is still suffering from the short- or long-term effects of that collapse, and has not organized yet (technologically and socially) to a level comparable to the civilization pre-collapse.***⁸

Some clarifications are needed. First, it is important to distinguish here between stories that take place *in the short term*, or during, the collapse, and stories taking place *in the long term*, decades or centuries after the collapse. The former usually have more to do with the turmoil and the day-to-day survival, after securities taken for granted have disappeared. The latter have a different feel to them: a certain level of civilization (usually tribal) has risen, but life is lived as in the shadow of the giants of the past, which take legendary dimensions; there has been much loss of historical knowledge, and thus the past is misty and tinted with legend. While the former take place in a civilization very much like the one at the time of writing, the latter tend to take as their pre-collapse reference a more futuristic civilization.

If we understand *science fiction* in its most literal sense, that is, as stories that introduce, as a plot element, fictional elements of science or technology, then most post-apocalyptic stories belong to the genre of science fiction, whether the collapse be due to a fictional virus, aliens or exaggerating the effects of environmental forces for dramatic purposes. But there will be technical exceptions, namely cases in which the collapse is due to *fantastic* forces (ghosts, demon gates), theological fiction (a literal end-of-times), or marginal cases in which no new elements are imagined, only the *usage* of ready-at-hand technology (e.g. a nuclear

⁷ Thus we find in Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* that "the changing and interpenetrating nature of the genres is such as to make their definition impossible" (1982, 25; quoted in Nyström 2021, 9).

⁸ More cautiously but on similar lines, Andreas Nyström talks of the "dominant generic tendency" of post-apocalyptic fiction, which he understands to be "the genre's description of a situation after a large-scale destruction of economic, physical, and sociocultural infrastructures—a feature that seems to be shared by all scholarly definitions of the post-apocalyptic genre" (11). For a more in-depth discussion of the challenges of defining post-apocalyptic fiction, see Nyström (2021), 5-11.

doomsday scenario set in present times).⁹ Thus, while the majority of post-apocalyptic stories would probably fall under the wide umbrella of science fiction, some of them will not, and often post-apocalyptic stories will incorporate elements both from fantasy and science fiction. Ultimately, whether one wants to consider post-apocalyptic fiction as “a subgenre of science fiction with exceptions,” or both as separate genres with significant overlap, is unimportant; what is important is recognizing the unifying quality and peculiar aesthetic “feel” of the post-apocalyptic genre itself.

One must also distinguish this kind of story from “dystopian” fiction: in the latter (which may present as explanatory background some past apocalyptic collapse) we commonly encounter a highly organized faction using sophisticated means of propaganda and thought control. This level of organization is absent in post-apocalyptic stories (though again there is the possibility for interesting overlap, as with the various iterations of *Logan’s Run*, which begin in a dystopian city and continue in a post-apocalyptic environment).

B. “FANTASY” AND “TOLKIENIAN FAIRY STORIES”

Science fiction works by “extending,” so to speak, the reach of our (or the author’s) current understanding of science and the natural world, without directly contradicting it. While often it takes liberties, its general drive is to try to fit its stories within the boundaries of the scientifically known. By contrast, I would propose that the essence of the Fantasy genre is to introduce elements, at the metaphysical level, that intentionally disregard or contradict these limits. Gravity still works, but a magically endowed individual can straddle a common broom and command it to soar through the skies. No “scientific explanation” is needed for this unlikely phenomenon once it is established that this is something magic can do. Magic in Fantasy may have its own rules, laws, and even explanations, but these are elements that operate at a different “metaphysical tier” than natural laws. From this starting point, Fantasy becomes another enormous “umbrella” genre, capable of including traditional fairy stories, ancient mythological adventures, epic sword & sorcery, urban fantasy, vampire romance and everything in-between.

It is within this umbrella that we encounter the more specific kind of story that Tolkien describes in “On Fairy Stories.” Tolkien expresses the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility of defining “fairy stories” in any manner that might lock the expression semantically—in terms, say, of their theme, setting, archetypal characters or plot structure: “Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words” (OFS 114). Instead, Tolkien’s strategy and purpose is to delineate the kind of aesthetic

⁹ The specific causes of the collapse (plagues, resource collapse, natural or ecological catastrophes, technology out of control, alien or supernatural invasion), are significant storywise, in that they define to some extent (sometimes by reaction) the kind of world/society that follows the collapse.

experience that the “best” of these stories elicit. Thus, we can speak of a “Tolkienian fairy story” (the expression being standard now in Tolkien studies) as the kind of fantasy story that is apt to produce the aesthetic effects which Tolkien describes, in his essay, as the four “functions” or “roles” of a fairy story.¹⁰

It is my claim here that, whether they include fantastic elements or (more commonly) not, post-apocalyptic narratives align very strongly with these four functions/roles, making it possible to analyze their aesthetic and existential impact in much the same way in which Tolkien did this for “Tolkienian” fairy stories. Thus, in what follows, I will explain each of these functions, and show how they fit the post-apocalyptic genre.

1. ENCHANTMENT

The first of the functions or effects of fairy stories identified by Tolkien is what he calls in his essay “Enchantment” (OFS, 138-145). This function can be understood at different levels. At its most general, this function refers to the capacity of “good” (as in *well-told*) stories¹¹ to allow us to live temporarily in a “sub-creation,” in a rich and consistent fictional reality created by a human author (OFS 140). Its effect is that wonderful experience of getting “lost” in a story, one’s imagination so strongly commanded by the events, circumstances and setting, that pausing the story to take care of “real world” needs feels almost like an intrusion, like waking up to a less interesting, sometimes nagging reality. This possibility is not unique to fantasy stories, of course; it is possible to achieve such an effect in any storytelling genre, the main factor being the ability of the author or storyteller to weave plot, details and pacing in such a way that the audience becomes “enchanted” by them.

More narrowly referring to fantasy stories, Tolkien emphasizes the ability of the genre to conjure up, in literary credible ways, a “Secondary World,” that stands out because of what Tolkien calls its “arresting strangeness” (OFS 139). The genre is distinctive in that things can happen, creatures can be encountered, places can be visited, which do not exist, have not existed and *could not* exist in our

¹⁰ To be clear, this kind of story does not need to even include “fairies” in them—particularly not the tiny winged creatures beloved by the Victorian era, which Tolkien openly disliked (OFS, 111). The term comes from a more ancient understanding of “Faërie”: a realm of supernatural/magical beings and events, that is primarily characterized by its quality of *enchantment* (OFS, 113).

¹¹ The expression “good story” will mean, in the context of this paper, a story that does not simply belong to the genre, but that is told in such a skillful way as to provide a strong chance of eliciting the experiences described by Tolkien in his essay. “Good” here does not refer to the presence or absence of any edifying “moral” to the story; it means that the story is an adequate exemplar. Thus “good” here is an ontological/aesthetic expression rather than a moral one. This said, Tolkien’s implication seems to be that good stories *also* make a person better, but in a more profound, metaphysical way than the intentionally didactic quality he found (and disliked) in many children stories of his time.

primary reality, at least insofar as we know it to be (a common theme in these stories being, of course, the confusion of their characters when they realize there is more to the world than what they assumed could be). Beings that are more spirit than matter, magical causality, locations, objects and people of legendary beauty, physical impossibilities, such things are woven into the fabric of the world, making it “arrestingly” different from our everyday reality. In doing so, they account for their distinctive aesthetic experience, which I propose to call here, for simplicity, their *outlandishness*.¹²

In this sense, post-apocalyptic stories depict a reality that is equally (or analogously) *outlandish*, but for different reasons and with a different aesthetic *feel* to them. The elements that make them peculiarly outlandish are many, but I would like to propose as the central ones the following list, that may be improved upon: (1) the Haunting Loneliness; (2) the Transformed Landscape; (3) the New Rules for Survival, (4) the New Mythos and Future Histories, (5) the Repurposing of Common Things, and (6) the Layered Naming of Things and People. Let us look at them in some detail.

1.1. The Haunting Loneliness

Post-apocalyptic stories often dwell on the psychological strife of those left behind by the catastrophe. If fairy stories often tell the story of an everyday person magically swept into the realm of Faërie and becoming lost to their people in the non-magical world, post-apocalyptic stories reverse this effect by sweeping everyone else away, leaving the protagonist alone and having to deal not only with

¹² In choosing to use the term “outlandish” as my preferred stand-in for Tolkien’s “arresting strangeness” I may be guilty, as a reviewer has pointed out, of trying to reinvent the wheel. A rich literary tradition has already engaged deeply in discussing this rupture with familiarity. It is particularly strong among the Romantic poets (who predate Tolkien’s essay by more than a century). The same reviewer has helpfully pointed out a variety of terms used in attempting to name this experience, such as Viktor Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* (1990), which has been translated as “estrangement” and “defamiliarization,” and Freud’s *Das Unheimliche*, often translated as “the uncanny,” but that means literally “the not-home-like.” The difficulty with adopting some of these terms lies, first, in their present, current use, which adds distracting connotations. “Estrangement,” an otherwise excellent term, adds the connotation “mutual enmity or indifference . . . where there had formerly been love, affection, or friendliness” (Merriam-Webster). “Defamiliarization” is appropriate, but either too general or too tied to literary techniques. “Uncanny” adds a reference to the supernatural (Merriam-Webster), and is more commonly applied to Lovecraftian fantasy than post-apocalyptic fiction. As a secondary difficulty, some of these terms do not offer an equally suitable adjective. Of “estrangement” it would need to be “strange,” which is far too broad. We could use perhaps “arrestingly strange,” or “un-home-like” but this would be too clunky in most situations.

“Outlandish” has the connotations of *foreign, bizarre, remote*, and even *exceeding proper or reasonable limits or standards* (Merriam-Webster). These are all useful connotations, and the term is elegant and easy to use. In the end, though, I may be trying to justify what is ultimately an aesthetic preference. If pressed, I will concede the point, being satisfied if I am understood.

the practicalities of survival—in what has suddenly become hostile territory—but with how to cope with the sudden, overwhelming loneliness. This is sometimes the premise itself of the story. *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959) opens with Harry Belafonte’s character, Ralph Burton, wandering through an empty New York, and it is forty minutes into the film before he finds a fellow human being—an encounter both yearned for and feared. Eeriness is the prevailing emotion, as the city is transformed into a surreal place, absent its people, its sounds and its bustling about. This marks also the most inspired scenes of some hallmark zombie stories—with Cillian Murphy prowling in his hospital gown through an empty Trafalgar Square in *28 Days Later* (2002), and *The Walking Dead* sheriff Rick Grimes trotting on his horse through the abandoned highways of Atlanta (2010, S.1, E.1).

While there are some existential points to be made later, what I want to emphasize here is that such stories draw us in, among other powerful reasons, because *we cherish the eeriness itself*. Whatever the plight of the characters, the drama is made even more overpowering by its taking place at the center of what may have been a highly populated, perhaps highly urbanized area, every store and poster and abandoned object a reminder of the lost community. To grasp this point, one must not jump too quickly into the metaphorical: naturally, such stories can provide insight into, say, the plight of the city dweller feeling isolated among the unseeing hordes of an urban population; such an analysis is valid, and such reflections will be needed when we discuss “Recovery.” But before we get there, it is important to reflect on the specific aesthetic feelings that we experience *directly* from getting pulled into the story. We feel and are drawn in by the sadness of *I Am Legend*’s (2007) Robert Neville—living for years in a desolate New York with only his dog for company, speaking to mannequins in a record store—*before* the story makes us think, perhaps, of that loner that comes to our store because they have no one else to talk to, and how important it is that they see us smile at them.¹³

1.2. The Transformed Landscape

Transformed landscapes are a strong selling point for post-apocalyptic stories: they combine the potential sublimity of the filmic scenery with the outlandish quality of fantastic landscapes, while providing us occasionally with the intellectual satisfaction of recognizing places and milestones that have been cleverly altered. It is reality with a twist; augmented reality, if you will. Post-apocalyptic stories draw us in because they promise an experience of the outlandish, a “what if” that does not simply address our intellectual curiosity but also our *aesthetic* curiosity. *What would it look like* for New York to be abandoned and empty, to the point that gazelles stampede past Fifth Avenue and are brought down by lions in Times

¹³ For a rich exploration of the haunting loneliness in this movie, along with the character’s strategies to cope with it, see Elidrissi, 2021.

Square? We have experienced a little of this during Covid times, as people uploaded videos of wild animals roaming through various cities (ABC News 2020). There is something not just hopeful, but almost magical in those images.

Thus, post-apocalyptic stories reward our aesthetic cravings with another type of fairy tale, one in which our commonplace environment—buildings and streets and malls and parking lots—has been transformed by that natural magic called *time*. Tall and proud state buildings are now dusty, crumbling and overgrown; nature has returned, turning our cities into forests or deserts. The loneliness we spoke about also transforms the landscape by the very absence of crowds going about their business. Finally, the destructive elements that brought about the catastrophe also contribute to transform the landscape in this outlandish mode: shore cities are reclaimed by the sea (Miyazaki's *Future Boy Conan*, 1978), toxic jungles hide gargantuan arthropods (*Nausicaä of the Valley of The Wind*, 1984), hills of human skulls provide cover from hunter-killer machines (*The Terminator*, 1984), the deserts glow bright at night (*Wasteland*, 1988), the entire world is now covered by water (*Waterworld*, 1995) or ice and snow (*Snowpiercer*, 2020). As scary as might be the possibility of such visions turning real, the fictional actuality of such worlds is received with thrill and awe, even with some version of the *sublime*, that peculiar pleasure that occurs in the presence of something overwhelming, something so disproportionate to our experience that “we cannot get our heads around it” (Burnham).

Considering the ways in which landscapes are transformed in post-apocalyptic stories paves the way for looking at some of the other elements, as the landscapes are often made outlandish by the new and unforeseen perils they host, and are transformed (human landscapes in particular) by the need to use the available resources in creative and novel ways.

1.3. The New Rules for Survival

In the world of *Reign of Fire* (2002), a lesser but heartfelt work, the few survivors of the human race live underground, passing their culture to the younger generations through ritual reenactments of such essential moments as Vader's reveal to Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back*. After classes are done, children are reminded to repeat this responsorial:

What do we do when we are awake?

Keep both eyes on the sky.

What do we do when we sleep?

Keep one eye on the sky.

What do we do when we see them?

Dig hard, dig deep, go for shelter, and never look back.

This they must do because humanity has been chased to the brink of extinction by, yes, *dragons*. The constant peril of being burned to a crisp by these fearsome beasts defines their landscape, their society, their world.

In his essay, Tolkien makes a point of reminding us that the realm of Faërie has also been called *the Perilous Realm* (OFS 114). Here again we find a point of contact between fairy stories and post-apocalyptic fiction. Even in stories that do not intend to focus on action or adventure, (Margaret Atwood’s slow-burn *MaddAddam* trilogy, for example) the threat to survival is constant—from disease, from starvation, from aggressive species, even from such “trivial” environmental threats as glass falling off tall buildings when scavenging in the city. Things taken for granted (food, water, shelter from the elements) have now become life-or-death challenges.

It seems to be one of the defining qualities of our species that we seek stories of wondrous peril: every civilization has its share of heroes facing giants and dragons and chimeric beasts and tricksters and demons. I would argue that these stories are crafted and sought after primarily for the thrill of the stories themselves, and only *secondarily* as a response to social anxieties and such. Post-apocalyptic stories provide these thrills in very creative ways. Much like traditional fairy stories, too, where stories of common folk are found side by side with the exploits of larger-than-life heroes, post-apocalyptic stories—especially those close to the catastrophic events—can additionally thrill us by adding to the objective dangers of creature and environment the radical unpreparedness of the common folk, who must quickly adapt to their world suddenly turned hostile and deadly.

1.4. New Mythos and Future Histories

The beauty and horror of *The Juniper Tree*, with its exquisite and tragic beginning, the abominable cannibal stew, the gruesome bones, the gay and vengeful bird-spirit coming out of a mist that rose from the tree, has remained with me since childhood; and yet always the chief flavour of that tale lingering in the memory was not beauty or horror, *but distance and a great abyss of time*. . . (OFS 128, emphasis mine)

In landscape paintings, the farthest objects are painted in lighter, less saturated colors. This creates the illusion of distance, reproducing the way in which objects look when a larger volume of air is interposed between them and the viewer; but the foggier look also lends distant objects a quality of mystery, etherealness, a magical air perhaps.¹⁴ In a similar manner, authors of post-apocalyptic stories often shroud the past, even the not-too-distant past, in a veil of mythical figures and symbols. In stories of relatively recent catastrophes, this provides a feel for the

¹⁴ This quality is alluded to by Tolkien himself in *Leaf, by Niggle*, the companion story to “On Fairy Stories,” when the narrator mentions how the forest created by Niggle “was a distant Forest, yet he could approach it, even enter it, without it losing its particular charm.” (Tolkien 1978, 102.)

magnitude of the catastrophe and the amount of knowledge and culture lost in the aftermath. In stories of distant-past catastrophes, this narrative technique increases the feeling of eons having passed—enough time for the facts to have become blurry and out of proportion—and we are sometimes treated even to fictional secondary sources, as civilizations develop enough to support scholars that try to make sense of their sources. This technique can serve a dual-purpose as a plot device, with the characters having to unravel the factual meaning of tales and recitations, and it is particularly effective when the stories themselves are performed in a ritualistic setting (as famously done—and frequently copied—in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, 1985). In terms of Enchantment itself this is a most effective technique, lending to the story mystery and aesthetic depth, adding a sense of the sublime as the reader feels that the present adventures provide just a window to a much, much larger world.

1.5. The Repurposing of Common Things

The Argentinian comic *El Eternauta* (1957-1959) famously begins with an eerie snowfall in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. As soon as the snow touches the skin of friends and neighbors—who have gone out to check out this unusual event—they fall dead. The protagonist, finding himself trapped in his house, must construct an improvised hazmat suit from an assortment of odds and ends. The movie version of *World War Z* (2013) shows Brad Pitt’s character cleverly tying print magazines to his forearms, a simple improvised armor that makes you wonder why no one has used it before. Simpler, perhaps, the original novel (2006) has a blind Japanese gardener use a long-handled spade as a highly effective weapon against the undead hordes. The covers of various editions of the classic role-playing game *Gamma World* show a menagerie of post-apocalyptic creatures that have crafted speed signs into shields and body armor.

This kind of clever repurposing is always fun to watch in itself—it is a form of the aesthetic pleasure we experience in watching someone perform expertly in an activity, the activity here being survival in extreme conditions by keeping a cool head and thinking creatively. But as to the quasi-fairy tale aspect of it, again this shows a landscape transformed, not physically, but in terms of the *meanings* of common things. A rolled magazine protects from zombie bites, a spade is now a pole arm, the lid of a garbage bin a convenient buckler. Perhaps the most extreme of these transformations takes place in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), in which the hero himself is transformed against his will into a portable container of “high-octane blood” for mutant warriors incapable of producing their own.

This in time turns the human landscape positively outlandish, as the remains of society turn to scavenge for resources through the physical remains of past civilizations. Primitive technologies—from weapons to household tools to jewelry

and tribal decorations—come alive again, but the materials are new: no longer wood and fur and stone and feather, but plastic and ceramic and silicone and composites, candy wrappers and broken screens.

1.6. The Layered Naming of Things and People

Perhaps more subtle, but instrumental also in setting the space for Enchantment, is the peculiar form of naming that we encounter in post-apocalyptic stories.

Frequently the naming of important things reverts to a simplicity that facilitates the turning of history into legend. In Walter Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), the nuclear war comes to be known as the *Flame Deluge*, a name with biblical overtones that provides semantic support to the masses' anti-scientific zeal. Such a "basic" name names the thing, but also hides its specific nature, while lending to past events a mythical quality.

This simplicity also allows the audience many-layered readings, providing reality with a metaphorical undertone. The name "Bartertown" in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* is straightforward enough, as it indicates the central function of the settlement; but the audience quickly picks on the metaphorical implications, as people become commodities in its idiosyncratic economic system.

A similar technique is often employed in the naming of professions and "tribes." The simplest appellatives are often sufficient: Hunters and Healers, Seers and Seekers, Scavengers and so forth. This simplicity immediately resonates with similar appellatives in fantasy stories (where we also find Seekers, Hunters, Healers and Seers), already providing an element of outlandishness by association. More esoteric professions (Gunslingers, Sandmen, Bullet Farmers, "Doof Warriors") are even more effective in intimating the outlandishness of the situation; writers can thus quickly paint an outlandish world by using these names as a sort of "shorthand." But the technique is used to its greatest advantage when it recovers names from the past and demonstrates that the present inhabitants have forgotten their original meanings, while still retaining some of their function. Thus in *Wasteland* (1988), when visiting the "Rail Nomads"—a faction that recreates native American nomadic groups but ties them to the routes of old railroad tracks—the player is greeted by the "Brakeman" of the camp, and later meets the "Engineer" by the locomotive. The old functions now indicate dignity and status within the group, which is divided into three tribes, cleverly named the Atchisons, Topekas and Santa Fes—"Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe" being the name of a U.S. railroad branch that operated until 1996. The Rail Nomads forms a very short segment of gameplay in *Wasteland*, but the thought put into the naming and shaping of this group makes the player feel that there is so much more to this world.

Thus, groups, tribes, professions, activities, significant places and people are named in ways that seem straightforward to those inhabiting that world, but who lack the relative depth of historical knowledge the audience has at their

disposal. This allows for layers of irony that are lost on the in-world characters, but that we, the audience, can grasp. What was previously harmless has now acquired an “edge.” It is, indeed, a most Tolkienian theme: names, like mostly anything else, have been transformed, and are now part of a Perilous Realm.

* * *

Let us bring these observations together before moving on to the subsequent roles/functions of fairy stories. Tolkien proposes that “Enchantment” is their *primary* role/function: they draw the audience in, making them forget that they are attending to a story, and in particular draw them into an experience of “arresting strangeness,” an experience of the Outlandish. This quality of fairy stories (and what is more contemporarily called the Fantasy genre) grounds the other roles or functions of Recovery, Escape and Consolation. From copious examples we can draw the conclusion that post-apocalyptic stories share in the function of Enchantment: they too draw us into a peculiar experience of the Outlandish, through at least six common features of the genre (the list is not intended to be comprehensive). If this is so, then it is likely that post-apocalyptic stories will share in the other functions too. This is not a necessary conclusion, however, and thus we must examine each function in turn.¹⁵

2. RECOVERY

We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses— and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. (OFS, 146)

In Tolkien’s analysis, fairy stories have derived functions beyond their primary, essentially aesthetic one. I would call them “existential,” in the sense that their effects go beyond the conceptual and contribute to the overall experience of human beings’ lives, restoring and enhancing our appreciation of the goodness of reality, providing respite from times in which the evil and hardships of our reality become overwhelming, and eliciting in the reader the hope that such evil and hardships have not the ultimate word. These functions he named Recovery, Escape and Consolation.

¹⁵ Since it is possible to talk of post-apocalyptic stories with fantastic elements, we could find both veins of outlandishness *enhancing* each other. It is appropriate that the katana-wielding protagonist of *Six-String Samurai* (1998), after fighting his way through cannibals, road warriors and an entire Russian regiment, must, in a classic fantasy twist, hold a final guitar duel with Death himself; the fantastic and post-apocalyptic motifs have been weaving together throughout the story. They motifs remain distinctive, but enrich and refresh each other. The possibility of overlapping motifs, that do not confuse the experience but rather spice it up, should be kept in mind when examining the derivative functions.

The function of *Recovery* is perhaps the easiest to grasp. In Tolkien's words:

Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. I do not say “seeing things as they are” and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them”—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness. (OFS, 146)

This triteness is really the penalty of “appropriation”: the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them. (OFS, 146)

To fully grasp the import of this function, one must put oneself in a philosophical space that regards reality not as a neutral “being there,” but as essentially good; and “good” not in an ethical but in a metaphysical sense, such as is explicated, for example, by Josef Pieper in his famous 1946 lectures “Leisure: The Basis of Culture” and “The Philosophical Act” (Pieper 2009). While Pieper embraces in his lectures the classical tradition all the way back to Plato, he primarily focuses on Thomas Aquinas's view of the world as *Creation* (Philosophical Act, 90). Because the world is the Creation of an infinitely good and loving God, the world itself proves to be inexhaustible, in the sense that no matter how much we lived, experienced and studied it we would never get tired of it (Leisure, 49; Philosophical Act, 114).

And yet, through encroaching familiarity, we *do* get bored and tired and used to it, familiar “in a bad sense.” Embarrassingly easily, too. This is often expressed as “losing our sense of wonder.” When this happens, then the world can no longer reach us of its own worth; we lose our ability to appreciate things such as they are, and to find delight in them. Then our relations to other beings end up limited to the utilitarian, to productivity, yield, profit, or to pleasure in a utilitarian sense. It is, from the point of view described by Pieper, a fundamentally impoverished sort of life.

Thus, as Tolkien says, our “windows” need to get freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity. The hope is that the aesthetic experience of fairy tales become a source of renewal from this triteness, by throwing a new or refreshing life on things. “By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory” (OFS, 147).

This is by no means the only avenue available for Recovery. Tolkien mentions “humility,” and a particular form of near-fantasy (“Chestertonian fantasy” or “Mooreffoc,”) that allows us, through a trick of the mind, to distance ourselves from things and see them anew, as from an inverted telescope (OFS, 146). Pieper adds to the list philosophy, poetry, prayer, love (Philosophical Act, 82). Fantasy stories, though, have a peculiar advantage: they are intentionally *sub-creative*; and this creativity, Tolkien proposes, makes the wild potentiality of reality all the more apparent.

Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you. (OFS, 147)

This is a brief explication of Tolkien’s theory of the Recovery function of fairy stories. Whether fairy stories really accomplish this “Recovery,” and if so, how this might be established, are important questions, but beyond the scope of this paper. What concerns us here is in what ways post-apocalyptic narratives parallel this function. Applying Tolkien’s notion of Recovery to post-apocalyptic narratives showcases possibilities even more apparent than those proposed about fairy stories themselves.

A couple of the motifs mentioned earlier already lead to this conclusion: the *Transformed Landscape*, the *New Rules for Survival* and the *Repurposing of Common Things* are incitements to look at things from unusual angles. This retooling is almost like a challenge; post-apocalyptic scenarios encourage us to look at things in new and creative ways, think about how they could be of use in a crisis, what we should leave behind and what could provide unexpected functions. Even if you have no fear whatsoever of a zombie uprising, a read like *World War Z* will very likely get you puzzling out escape routes and thinking of what impromptu weapons you might find at home, were such a scenario to play out. The *Layered Naming* also provides an avenue for Recovery, as we make an intellectual double-take and realize how the usual names offer latent but formerly unrecognized (unrealized?) meanings.

A most significant way in which these stories offer Recovery, though, is through recourse to *scarcity*. Post-apocalyptic stories in almost all cases display, as part of the fleshing out of the world (“world building”) or as a plot point, intriguing situations of scarcity (a point often lost in post-apocalyptic games, where “scarce” resources end up being overabundant to support repetitive actions like fighting and healing). This scarcity has the effect of throwing us off, making us revisit the many things we take for granted, and perhaps revalue them in this new light. While often

this scarcity refers to functioning “ancient” technologies, scarcity becomes philosophically interesting when it points at basic resources. In *Mad Max 2* (1981), the struggle for the possession of a surviving source of gasoline throws light on how dependent we have become on fossil fuels. *Beyond Thunderdome* has moved beyond this as the inhabitants of Bartertown attempt to produce methane: the *know how* is in this case the scarce resource, and the man that possesses this knowledge becomes the goal of a quest. In *Waterworld* (1995), a tomato plant or even a fistful of fertile earth are regarded as priceless treasures; “dust to dust” acquires renewed meaning as, after a brief religious ceremony, the bodies of the deceased are composted, their base materials too precious to discard. In *The Book of Eli* (2010), the title character must barter for a trickle charge for his ancient iPod; the one surviving Bible is here the priceless prize. In *The City of Ember* (DuPrau 2003) light itself is the precious resource. *Fury Road* brilliantly adds *blood* to the list of scarce resources: constant transfusions from prisoners are required to keep alive a small army of mutant soldiers, who lack the ability to produce their own. It makes the audience pause and think about the wonderful gift that it is to be able to produce one’s own, healthy blood, particularly as the story allows you to empathize with one of these doomed warriors. Yet perhaps the most poignant example can be found in *Children of Men* (2006): humanity has lost the ability to have children, and the film displays the breakdown of society as an effect of this very loss, a collective loss of meaning. What is for us a commonplace occurrence—a young pregnant woman—is regarded as nothing short of a miracle, making soldiers pause and weep in the middle of brutal warfare. It is difficult to think of a better way to recover a sense for the wonder of a woman with child.

In reverse, scarcity can also elicit the Recovery, or perhaps Revision, of our generalized priorities. Again, in *Children of Men*, the protagonist’s brother, a man of political power, hoards the most prized works of art. The collection feels like an empty gesture as society nears dissolution and no newer generation has arrived to pass onto them the appreciation of such objects.

Post-apocalyptic stories, then, have in common with fairy stories a powerful aptitude for eliciting in the audience an experience of Recovery, of regarding familiar things anew or from a new angle, thus regaining an appreciation and wonder for things long taken for granted.

3. ESCAPE / RESPITE

Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. 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. (OFS 148)

Probably the most conflictive among Tolkien's functions of fairy stories is what he calls "Escape," and which he opposes, in his leading metaphor, to "the Flight of the Deserter." The meaning is metaphorical, of course. Fairy stories do not provide the ability to *physically* escape from danger or unpleasant situations, but in weaving their Enchantment they make it possible for the audience to temporarily forget about unpleasantness, ugliness, sadness, pain, fear, disappointment and negative feelings in general; perhaps even offer a glimmer of hope (but this is their fourth function, "Consolation").

This notion found significant resistance among critics: are we not supposed to face difficulties with action, rather than turn our back on them and hide in denial? Is not Escape's strategy akin to the mythical ostrich hiding its head in the sand? Is not then Tolkien recommending a rather immoral "passivity," systematic, intentional denial—in effect, a defeatist attitude?

Tolkien advances his response to these potential criticisms by distinguishing the attitude of "escapism" (an expression that encompasses the criticisms) from the legitimate desire to escape of the Prisoner, which, he argues, can be as different to the "Flight of the Deserter" as patriotism is to betrayal (148).

Scholarly literature has often returned to this point (Houston 2017, 10; Northrup 2004, 825; Raboteau 1995, 396), also discussed in popular philosophy media (Holdier 2020). It is not a difficult one to grasp—if there is no way to physically remove oneself from an extremely unpleasant or painful situation, it would seem ethically acceptable to preserve one's spirit and sanity by directing one's mind to more pleasant things, surely? Yet misunderstandings seem to persist, as scholars seem to feel obligated to return to this point and explain it yet again.

Partly the difficulties arise, in my opinion, from Tolkien's choice of the word "Escape." Tolkien's strategy is to take the word from the hands of the critics (those that decry fantasy stories as "escapist") and turn it against them. Tolkien, when likening the Escaped Prisoner to the resistant patriot (OFS 148), seems to have in mind someone who "escapes" *in order to fight another battle*, and not to leave the battle entirely (this would be the "deserter"). In fact, an encouragement to fly from reality and take refuge in denialist passivity would seem to directly contradict Tolkien's Christian worldview, which favors not Stoic resignation, but taking action and alleviating the suffering of one's neighbors (Matthew 25:40; James 2:15-17). Yet if this is Tolkien's intended meaning, his repurposing of the word *escape* does not completely succeed, and is bound to continue causing difficulties. The problem is that *escape*, when successful, is definitive, or at least persistent: an escaped prisoner may or may not want to go back to the fight. The fugitive certainly does not expect to return to their jail, but to reach a point in which they can live freely entirely.

If I may offer a simple solution to this difficulty, it would be more appropriate to talk of this third function instead as “Respite” (or possibly “Solace”; this latter term is one step closer to Consolation). This term seems to represent more accurately Tolkien’s idea. Without permanently denying a negative or evil state of affairs, fairy stories (among other options, but particularly powerfully because of Enchantment) make it possible for us to find temporary psychological refuge, even solace in beauty—again, even Consolation. Eventually the story has to end, but the hope is that one might emerge from the enchantment fortified, and if nothing can be done to change things externally, at least being able to look forward to the next story.

While changing “Escape” with “Respite” may help resolve the terminological misunderstandings, some critics will still raise questions about the legitimacy of Escape/Respite itself. Neomaxist literary criticism in particular, as summarized in Baker’s “Why We Need Dragons” (2012), anchors the valuation of literary works almost exclusively on their utilitarian capacity to “challenge the status quo” and promote political and social change. From this perspective, Escape is inescapably problematic: “‘evil’ has been vicariously defeated by the text’s hero and the need for social change effaced by nostalgic recollection” (Baker, 440). The more “enchanting” a story, in fact, the more blameworthy it will be, if it aligns with “reactionary” rather than “progressive” values. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to address this discussion. I will just mention that it appears to me that these views are not essentially different from those of the didacticists that Tolkien criticized, albeit with their political sign inverted. Their criterion for judging works of fantasy may be much too narrow, as it only considers the potential of a story for either reinforcing or challenging moral and political views.

Assuming, then, the legitimacy of this function, and an existential need for it, is there a way in which post-apocalyptic stories may be particularly good at offering Respite?

It does seem a strange proposition that stories about total world devastation, disease, distrust, loneliness, scarcity, death and possible extinction could provide any kind of solace. The answer I propose has some complexity to it: this is where I would like to address what I regard as a common misconception about the attraction these stories have for writers and their audience.

First, some of the literature has pointed out a possible “cathartic” effect of post-apocalyptic stories (Määttä 2015, 428, citing Sontag 1966, 225)—a point closer to Consolation, but it is methodologically clearer to approach it here. This possibility must be examined with some care. In Aristotle’s original meaning, “catharsis” is an emotional release precipitated by stories in the genre of tragedy; the audience feels “purged” and exhausted (but in a good way) after being present to such a story, which is recognized as fiction. Joe Sachs (IEP) expands the understanding of the term, including, notably, the purging of fear in horror stories.

This is a useful expansion, as post-apocalyptic stories (especially of the recent-catastrophe kind) tend to include tragic subplots, and (in general) horror-inducing creatures and situations. A good majority of post-apocalyptic fiction, however, belongs overall to the *adventure* genre: while the background is tragic, the heroes manage to navigate the difficulties and reach eventually a “good ending” rather than a tragic one, successfully overcoming dangers and horrors rather than succumbing to them. Thus, while useful in the analysis, *catharsis* is not enough to justify the attraction of the genre.

More commonly found in scholarship is the idea that the attraction of post-apocalyptic stories is grounded on, or a result of, the social anxieties of a particular historical period. Put in a simplistic manner, the expectation would be that the Cold War would give rise to a host of stories of post-nuclear devastation, while the present times may give rise to stories of environmental, robotic, and now pandemic apocalypse. With more nuance, Määttä’s survey (425-429) collects, as attempts to explain the “attraction” of stories “of cataclysmic events,” “middle class resentment towards the newly empowered working class” (Walton 2005, 38), a way of dealing symbolically with national traumas (Luckhurst 2005a, 130), British “post-imperial melancholy” (Luckhurst 2005b, 79), historical periods with heightened feelings of paralysis, vulnerability, helplessness, powerlessness and anxiety (Carroll 1981, 16), death fantasies (Sontag 1966, 212-213), an “aesthetics of destruction” (Sontag, *ibid.*), adolescent rebellious fantasies (Walton 2005, 38) and even expressions of guilt (Wagar 1982, 66-85). There is clearly a variety of negative feelings to choose from; but while not entirely off course, this explanation must be also examined carefully. Let us take it point by point.

1) First, there is some evidence that the process is never as simplistic as that. Tracking numbers of post-apocalyptic stories mentioned in surveys through the years, Määttä’s tentative conclusion is that the number of crisis-specific post-apocalyptic stories dwindles, rather than grows, at historical times in which the crises themselves seem more likely or imminent, and also at times of calm (426). Thus, there is not a direct correlation between the degree of “social anxiety” and the number of stories produced.

2) Anxiety, I would argue, is not enough of a motive to write or read a story; or not enough to generate “popular” narrative interest (while it could be at the center of more experimental works, such as Sartre’s). Missing a flight is, for me, a more common source of anxiety than zombie uprisings or shark attacks, yet I am rarely intrigued by stories about airports that do not have Bruce Willis in them. The point is that, while “social anxiety” may increase interest in a type of story, it is not enough to justify its coming into being, if the focus of that anxiety is not itself something with narrative possibilities. And there is also the possibility that post-apocalyptic stories (especially when acting as cautionary tales) may actually

contribute to an increase in social anxiety, rather than venting it, much as Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) managed to scare a whole generation out of swimming pools. This increase in social anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing, insofar as we may be warned about things we *should* be anxious about. But overall, a more common explanation than that of a social "emotional outlet" seems to be that fearful things provide interesting material to the creators of stories, whether or not actual anxiety motivates them at any level. In this, Tolkien's image of the "leaf-mould of the mind" (as quoted by Carpenter, 2000, 131) probably describes better the reality of how stories take shape in the imagination of their creators.

3) A related criticism concerns the jump to the metaphorical, that is sometimes used to explain the popularity, e.g., of zombie uprising stories. It is true that zombies can stand in for a variety of symbols—corporate life, bureaucracy, mass hysteria, even low-level, mindless jobs (as depicted famously in *Shawn of the Dead*). But, aside from obvious satire, what the audience seeks in such stories is the particular kind of thrill provided by an unstoppable, ever-growing force of destruction that pushes the protagonists' mettle and ingenuity to extremes. It is when scholars get their hands on them that the symbolism comes to the surface. In short, it is more likely the *story*, and not the symbols, that originally drives the audience's interest, although rich symbolism, and more generally, a story with a lot to think about, contribute to the continuous interest in a story as a source of reflection, discussion and aesthetic/intellectual enjoyment.

Thus, if we are to find the roots or reason for a growing interest in post-apocalyptic stories, we should look for them *first* in those elements that I described under *Enchantment*. The peculiar attractiveness of these stories lies in the arrestingly strange aesthetic experience that they create, *before* their ability to address or assuage feelings of anxiety, although the latter may contribute to the experience.

Not to be unnecessarily misunderstood: my intention is not to downplay the importance of post-apocalyptic stories as conveying important "messages" and warnings, their "cautionary tale" function that is an important component of science fiction in general. It is quite possible for authors to intentionally address rising issues and concerns specifically as their way of sorting through these. This seems to be the case, for example, with Walter Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*: while the world creation is phenomenal, there is little in the sense of adventure—the author seems more concerned with making some sense of the human tendency to inflict damage upon ourselves. Authors, and stories, can work at many levels. A story that failed to enchant us could still effectively caution us.

What I do want to propose is that, despite a scholarly focus on post-apocalyptic stories as a sort of lightning rod for social anxieties and concerns, the most substantial part of their attraction lies in their capacity for *Enchantment*. But this outlandishness, their "arresting strangeness," makes it possible for the audience

to *take refuge* in these stories and gain temporary respite from the darker aspects of reality. It is hard, of course, to read a work like *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003) without feeling overwhelmed by the ugliness and the selfishness and the all-consuming greed that it depicts as our near-future. Yet epic romps like *Beyond Thunderdome* may be watched with absolute delight, without being bothered once by the fossil-fuel depletion mentioned just briefly at the beginning of the film. There is a light ecological warning, like the touch of a feather, but then it is all desert vistas and patchwork vehicles and bungee-cord duels, which transport us for a while to an outlandish place with very little moral relevance to our daily lives. Does this make the film evil, unworthy, “escapist” in a loathsome sense?

4. CONSOLATION

But the “consolation” of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. (*OFS*, 153)

In asserting that the “happy ending,” the “good turn,” “Eucatastrophe” (“good catastrophe”)¹⁶ is the “true form” of the fairy tale, Tolkien was making a stand against a popular attitude—prevalent not only in professional criticism, but in the way regular people tended to judge stories—that has its origins in a philosophical point of view: the idea that happy endings are “unrealistic,” and as such escapist, and ultimately detrimental for a healthy view of life. It is an understandable criticism: if, from reading “too many” fairy stories, a person grows expecting that all good actions will be rewarded, humility, kindness and generosity will always triumph over pride and greed and selfishness, and the underdog will find social recognition and everlasting love just by staying true and loyal and principled, well, she will be in for a rude awakening. “The world does not work that way,” this criticism implies, “and you are better prepared for life if you go in knowing that.”

And yet, that the world ultimately *does* work that way is what fairy stories are about. Who has it right, then?

A terminological clarification may be needed here: in making this point, Tolkien circumscribes his meaning strictly to “fairy stories,” not to *all* fantasy. Many of the traditional legends in the Norse and Celtic corpus, for example, end up

¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the genesis of this concept, see Northrup 2004, 831. Northrup notes that, in its original (etymological) meaning, “catastrophe” can mean a “downturn,” and also an “ending.” Thus it is not redundant for Tolkien to talk of a “dyscatastrophe” (a “bad” catastrophe) opposed to Eucatastrophe.

rather tragically, and Tolkien would be well aware of this, as witnessed by the over-the-top tragic story of Túrin Turambar (*The Silmarillion*, Ch. 23). More generally, Tolkien openly cherishes the tone of inevitable-yet-heroic defeat, characteristic of pagan English and Norse mythos (Tolkien 2006b, 21). Tolkien is not stating that *all fantasy* must be of this kind. What he is asserting is that we *need* fairy stories “proper,” because they provide this Consolation.

Nor is Tolkien proposing that simplistic “happy-ever-after” endings necessarily fulfill this function. This is why he favors the expression “the good turn,” and also makes up his own term.¹⁷ *Eucatastrophe* does not exclude great strife and hardship and even sorrow and loss; in fact, its successful construction seems to demand it, in order to build up towards that overwhelming, poignant joy that the successful fairy story produces. Without a lot of badness, the good turn would still be *good*; but narratively speaking, it would be barely perceptible.

Thus, in proposing Consolation as the proper function of the fairy story, Tolkien is not negating the reality of evil, but asserting that, in the long run—sometimes in the *very* long run—*good has the last word*. And that we need to be reminded and shown this—not via a philosophical argument, but within the artistic beauty of the fairy story—as a way, perhaps, of making the badness bearable.

It [the joy produced by the Consolation of fairy stories] 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 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. (OFS, 153)

This is not a mere psychological, “I wish to believe” kind of trick: Tolkien’s Catholic worldview asserts, philosophically and theologically, that the world is ultimately more good than evil—because it is Creation, and because evil itself is privation, no real being—and that the Gospels (which contain Christ’s story of sacrifice, death and resurrection and the promise of eternal life) contain “the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe” (OFS, 156). Thus, in the Gospels, “the joy which the ‘turn’ in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth” (OFS 156).

This point has been fairly developed in Tolkien scholarship (for instance in Houston, 2017, Johnston, 2011, Northrup, 2004). The point that concerns us now is, *do post-apocalyptic stories share in this function?* Is Eucatastrophe/Consolation a function of post-apocalyptic stories, or at least a common enough occurrence?

¹⁷ Tolkien disfavors the expression “happy ending,” “...for there is no true end to any fairy-tale” (OFS, 153). It is not clear to me whether the point he is making is narrative (meaning that the form of fairy stories must be somewhat open-ended) or existential (meaning, perhaps, that a “true” fairy story must not end; that the happiness achieved should be conceived as permanent or everlasting).

And if so—a secondary, but meaningful point—do they share also in the quasi-religious dimension that Tolkien attributes to fairy stories?

The general answer can be offered just by looking at narrative genres. Post-apocalyptic fiction is not *essentially* eucatastrophic; but insofar as *adventures* are, then post-apocalyptic fiction is preeminently eucatastrophic. I must introduce here the thesis that *adventures* also have the structure described by Tolkien, and that Consolation/Eucatastrophe in particular is essential for an adventure to be such: a story that does not end in a relatively high note (which might be as basic as the successful survival of the protagonist after an ordeal) is not an adventure but something else—comedy, tragedy, horror. Post-apocalyptic stories, of course, do not *need* to be adventures: they can belong to some other “existential genre.” In practice, however, most of them have been and are adventures; that is, they offer a good turn or eucatastrophic finale, again, not *qua* post-apocalyptic but *qua* adventures. This, I would argue, is not arbitrary, nor a result of narrative conventions, but a result of the tension produced by the extreme hardship and challenges proposed by the secondary world itself. To lay out a world in which everything is a new challenge, from individual survival to community building, and have the characters ultimately fail in achieving at least some temporary triumph, would be akin to laying out an extremely puzzling detective mystery, and have the detective end the story in complete bafflement. It can be done—experimentally, satirically, or as a form of horror—but it cannot be done too much; we are more likely to encounter such endings in short stories. In the presence of such scenarios we react as in the presence of a puzzle, thinking of ways of “beating” the obstacles, or craving (aesthetically and intellectually) that the heroes find a way to beat them, rather than succumb to them. The tension is thus built towards successful resolution—i.e., adventure. There is an element of encouragement for our present lives to be experienced and distilled from these adventures: if the characters can keep going through such dire straits, can we not keep going in the face of our own, much more commonplace hardships? That is, ultimately, the point of Consolation, at its secular level at least.

Much like with *Escape*, a number of critics, focused strongly on the function of literature of effecting social and political changes, will find this function problematic, and stories that offer this kind of Consolation to be worthy of criticism. While post-apocalyptic material *does* address burgeoning threats and anxieties—environmental, technological, biological—post-apocalyptic stories often end in some sort of triumph. Post-apocalyptic stories show a life that goes on, despite extreme hardships, transformations and extinction events; they seem to say that as brutal as things may be there is still some happiness to be had. In this sense, they offer a backhanded Consolation, so to speak, to our concerns and anxieties. The cautionary tale, which is such a characteristic mark of science fiction (Bakay 2021),

is thus tempered with the promise that, even if the worst came to happen, courage and inventiveness can still get us through it. But does this not *dilute the warning* too much? From the point of view of raising awareness, post-apocalyptic stories may be doing us a disservice: with one hand they warn us about the dangers of continuing what we are doing without changing; with the other, they tell us that we are still going to be “fine,” even if we do not change. In other words, while post-apocalyptic stories are good at raising haunting imagery about the dangers to come, they may not be the ideal medium to motivate the audience to change. There is a certain inevitability that makes you think, “the worst will happen anyway; let’s plan for afterwards.”¹⁸ Thus, there is a potential downside to this Consolation, which should be acknowledged.

5. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF POST-APOCALYPTIC STORIES

But let us continue exploring how else post-apocalyptic stories share in this function. Now, Tolkien has particularly high views about the possibilities for Consolation offered by fairy stories. Tolkien’s discussion of this function, as is well known, goes beyond the philosophical and into the theological. His views on Consolation are integrated into the thesis, thoroughly discussed in his academic circles, of Christianity as “true myth” (Houston 2017), and the idea that, because the ultimate constitution of reality is eucatastrophic (Christ having triumphed over death, the ultimate enemy), fairy stories are then “true”: fairy stories reveal this eucatastrophic constitution of reality. The joy that fairy stories elicit in their eucatastrophic denouement offers a glimpse of the ultimate Joy of Christian hope (OFS, 156). But is there something of this joy going on in post-apocalyptic narratives—that is, can we find in them something akin to the “poignant” joy that Tolkien describes as elicited by “good” fairy stories?

On a first look, their typical endings (insofar as one can find a “typical” ending in post-apocalyptic stories) seem to differ widely. In traditional fairy stories, the protagonists’ efforts are usually thoroughly rewarded by a joy that overrules any hardships they have experienced. Humiliated characters are elevated, small kindnesses are returned hundredfold, pettiness, meanness and greediness are punished poetically, and from the standpoint of community, evils are driven out and the land is restored. This does not seem to describe the typical ending of post-apocalyptic stories, even of those most clearly set up as adventures with a “happy ending.” If anything, post-apocalyptic stories seem to borrow more from the typical

¹⁸ A characteristic example of this conflicting message is found in the videogame *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017). The game treats the player to stunningly beautiful scenery, populated by majestic robotic dinosaurs, while ancient recordings tell of nations lost to rising seas, unemployment, unrest, displaced populations, and a string of related maladies: it is the catastrophic event that cleans this terrible slate.

Western in this regard: the community is saved, evildoers are punished and destroyed, but the protagonist must quietly move on (*Waterworld; Fury Road*), be left behind (*Mad Max 2; Beyond Thunderdome*), or simply trade their life for the community's (*I Am Legend*). The happiness achieved is not for them.

On a second look, this very same pattern is found at the resolution of Tolkien's *magnum opus*, *The Lord of the Rings*. Once evil has been destroyed and the land restored (including Frodo's own Shire), Frodo confesses to Sam:

"I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but *not for me*. It must often be so . . . when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them." (*The Return of the King*, 382; emphasis mine.)

If Tolkien's fiction faithfully reflects his views on the function of fairy stories, this means then that his views on Eucatastrophe are more complex than what I described above as fairy stories' "typical" endings. Susan Johnston (2011, 71) refers in part to that passage when she examines Tolkien's view of Eucatastrophe. In her analysis, Tolkien is reaching for a notion that goes beyond the merely symbolic and into the "sacramental":

To call something sacramental is to say more, much more, than that it is a sign pointing toward or marking the presence of the sacred; it is to say that, in it, the sacred, normally invisible, is made present and visible, that through the sacrament the sacred occurs anew. A sign is merely referential, whether connotative or denotative; a sacrament, by contrast, is performative, in that it makes something happen . . . (Johnston, 71)

In short (and perhaps oversimplifying Johnston's analysis), Tolkien is not simply saying that fairy stories symbolize or point at some ultimate Joy, but that to some extent, as "quasi-sacraments," they *bring forth* some of that Joy, and more generally, "grace" (71). But grace and the Sacraments, in Christian theology, are connected directly to Christ's mediating sacrifice: sacrifice must accompany grace, and vice versa. Is there some parallel to be found in the storytelling structure of post-apocalyptic stories?

There are, as a matter of fact, surprisingly numerous instances of post-apocalyptic stories that share in this structure exemplified by Frodo's arc—the sacrificial hero that is able to heal the land at the cost of becoming nearly one (and nearly consumed) by the sickness of the land. We find here what I would call a recurrent "symbol cluster," that centers on the figure of the Unifying/Sacrificial Hero. Every adventure must have some sort of hero; but post-apocalyptic stories very frequently do not just have "heroes," but figures that are somehow "anointed"—by peculiar circumstances, by crowd proclamation, by prophecies, or even by divine intervention—and as such given a special "chosen" status; and these

figures often fulfill their role at the cost of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, the Savior-hero often also fulfills the role of *uniting* conflicting worlds, much in the way in which, according to Christian theology, Jesus unites the human and divine natures in his own person, and “becomes sin” (II Cor. 5, 21). Additionally, the Savior’s actions and sacrifice are oriented towards a people finding their way to a “Promised Land.”

Examples, as I said, are surprisingly abundant (and I must warn the reader that what follows contains abundant spoilers). The heroic protagonist of the *Mad Max* series leads a convoy in the second installment, thinking that on his success depends the survival of a settlement. He fails, as the convoy is overtaken by marauders, but learns that he was only the decoy, the sacrificial victim, so to speak, so that the settlers could make their way to the coast, a sort of Promised Land they have seen in old pamphlets. In *Beyond Thunderdome*, Max finds out that his presence corresponds to a prophecy ritually celebrated by a tribe of desert children. Initially rejecting this savior role, he must step in its shoes: he helps the children rescue an old engineer, uniting past and future, old and young, and voluntarily stays behind to a near-certain death to help them escape the pursuing horde. In a final scene, having reached the legendary ruins of Sydney, the now older escapees ritually retell the story of their nameless savior. The characters of *Waterworld* follow, in lieu of scripture, a tattooed map on the back of a girl that leads to the legendary “Dryland,” where humanity might start anew; the main character must protect the secret from the greedy remainders of an exploitative humanity. Interestingly, he turns out to be a mutant with gills, uniting in his person humanity with the ocean. *I Am Legend*’s Robert Neville stays voluntarily in ground zero, alone for years, striving to find a cure and save humanity from a plague that turns the few survivors into feral, impossibly aggressive creatures. Found by an uninfected woman and child and besieged by the murderous creatures, he immolates himself, giving the woman and child the chance to escape and bring the cure to a colony of survivors. The compound is manufactured partly from his own blood and administered to an infected to form a serum—again, uniting both worlds.¹⁹ The hero of Kevin Costner’s *The Postman*, because he was part (however briefly) of the tyrannical “Holnist” faction and branded as such, has the right to challenge their authoritarian warlord and bring peace and unity to the land. But perhaps the most apt example can be found in Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä, of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which finds surviving human settlements at war with each other and with the ever-growing Toxic Jungle, home to gargantuan intelligent arthropods (“insects”). A tapestry foretells the coming of a hero that will unite both worlds.

¹⁹ The more poignant, alternative ending shows Neville reaching an unspoken understanding with the leader of the feral creatures, returning to him the woman he had captured, and asking them for their forgiveness.

This turns out to be the titular Nausicaä, a young woman with an uncanny ability to understand and empathize with the insects, who eventually gives her life to stop the war between human factions and the unstoppable swarm. Nausicaä brings together both worlds not by a stroke of luck, but by her incessant, self-giving dedication and generosity, an open heart that allows her to love unselfishly both humans and giant bugs.

Where prophecies are absent, sometimes naming fulfills their role. “Aloy,” the name given to the protagonist of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* in her naming ceremony, can be read as *alloy*, an admixture (generally of metals), quite possibly signifying her near-prophetic destiny of uniting the human nations and the “metal world” of machine animals that roam the land. Considering names, however, it is hard to beat *Neo*, the protagonist of *The Matrix* trilogy. The name itself means “new,” evoking the biblical “new man,” but the films also play with its anagram, calling him repeatedly “The One,” a common designation for destiny-chosen Saviors. Yet as “the One” he is also the one to bring unity between humans and machines, giving his life in an ultimate, Christ-like sacrifice.

This long series of examples may seem a bit random (and quite possibly guilty of selection bias, as I favor heroic narratives);²⁰ but there is a logic to the apparition of these motifs in so many stories, many of which could be considered part of a post-apocalyptic “canon.” This logic could be, a bit roughly, framed in this manner: there is an unsustainable situation that brings up the collapse of the Old World. Sometimes the collapse is brought about by the decaying (moral, political, environmental, economic) situation, and sometimes by the hasty measures intended to remedy the situation. In any case, as civilization falls and attempts to rise again, the survivors attempt to impose *the same flawed patterns* that failed in the Old World, relying on force and a show of power, backed by whatever destructive technology has survived the cataclysm. This will inevitably yield disastrous consequences. What is needed is not making the same mistakes again, but taking instead the more difficult path: burying one’s fears, making peace, and building a future together with whatever unlikely partners one must share the earth. Yet in a

²⁰ An additional categorization that I have not explored, but that might be useful, is between *heroic*, *proto-heroic* and *anti-heroic* post-apocalyptic narratives. Heroic narratives are characterized by characters that are “larger-than-life,” extraordinarily competent in the business of post-apocalyptic survival (and thus, even though their original attitude may be self-serving, they are usually dragged into helping others out of dire situations). *Proto-heroic* characters would be “normal” people, without any heroic level of competence, but with “their heart in the right place,” trying to uphold a high standard of decency/morality/humanity even at the cost of their probability of survival. *Anti-heroic*, in this categorization, would be characters without an extraordinary/heroic level of competence, and who have chosen to privilege their own survival even at the cost of “their humanity,” i.e., of other-oriented morality; e.g. by shooting potential competitors without warning. (Characters that actively look to cause harm to others in oppressive or murderous ways would be *villainous*, but they are commonly antagonists, rarely main protagonists of such stories).

world—or the remainders of one—filled with death and dangers and horrors and trauma, laying down one’s arms is not an easy thing to do. Therefore, the need of “The One,” that unlikely being who has lived in both worlds, who understands both well enough to know that peace and unity, as difficult as they seem, are possible; and who can lead the way, starting with a trusting few and a reluctant many. Yet by the same reasons, “The One” is likely to end up a creature inevitably separated from their community, unable to completely fit in any of its factions. Thus, when not destroyed by their sacrifice, they must live there as strangers, and eventually leave.

But is this Eucatastrophe? Of a kind. If traditional fairy stories approximate “a Joy that is here not complete,” post-apocalyptic stories seem to focus on the “here not complete” part. They do not fill us with a direct experience of joy (or do so rarely), but are bound to elicit that “Joy” of a different kind (as C.S. Lewis [1955, 18] called it) that is more about hints and glimpses; about yearning and longing—which is quite definitely, for Tolkien, fairy story territory.

CONCLUSION

Post-apocalyptic fiction can be a very rich source, not only of philosophical, but also (perhaps surprisingly) theological reflection. While already discussed in many keys, the genre is relatively untouched in terms of volume of scholarship. The approach I propose here is probably atypical (and, I hope, refreshing), as I have attempted to deemphasize to some degree the often-discussed angle of post-apocalyptic stories as expressions of social anxiety, fears, and possibly nihilistic ideas. While more “negative” readings are also legitimate and valuable, there is a risk of narrowing the scholarship by limiting the analysis to such frameworks. I have tried instead to emphasize their more immediate function as satisfyingly immersive, entertaining, thought-engaging and wonder-eliciting literature. To this purpose I have employed Tolkien’s conceptual framework for the analysis of fairy stories, which fits naturally the subject since, as I have attempted to demonstrate, there is a rich correlation in themes and functions between fairy stories and post-apocalyptic fiction.

I have only been able to sketch some of the conclusions, using relatively well-known stories (plus a few lesser-known ones). Each of the functions described by Tolkien could be expanded upon, and in particular, recurrent symbols and symbol-clusters deserve further exploration, as, despite the initial grimness of the subject, a closer examination reveals post-apocalyptic stories to be actually narratives of hope, inspiring us to take heart, be creative, seek unity, and never give up.

APPENDIX: A SUMMARY OF THESES AND PROPOSITIONS

Partly because scholarship on this genre is so new (as is the genre, relatively speaking), I have forwarded an unusual number of theses in this paper. It may be useful to list them here, both to restate them and to provide clear statements, which scholars and casual readers may in turn refute, criticize, support, or expand upon.

Regarding post-apocalyptic fiction as a genre:

- Post-apocalyptic fiction may be defined thematically as any story that takes place after the (typically catastrophic) collapse of civilization, in a world where the population is still suffering from the short- or long-term effects of that collapse, and has not organized yet (technologically and socially) to a level comparable to their civilization pre-collapse.
- The genre itself may be studied as a sub-genre within science fiction, but allows (if the distinction itself is granted) for some overlap with fantasy.
- Within the genre it is helpful to distinguish between stories taking place within or shortly after the catastrophe, and stories in which significant time has passed since the catastrophe, as they offer significantly different themes.
- The stories may serve significantly different thematic functions if the protagonists are featured as heroic, proto-heroic or anti-heroic.²¹

Regarding the origins or motivation for creating post-apocalyptic fiction:

- Explanatory frameworks that emphasize the role of prominent social concerns (“social anxieties”) are valid and useful, but so are they for any other genre of literature. If used to the exclusion of other explanations (as seems to be the trend) they may become narrow and reductive.

Regarding the use of Tolkien’s framework in the analysis of post-apocalyptic fiction:

- Tolkien’s conceptual framework in “On Fairy Stories” provides alternative possibilities for the analysis of post-apocalyptic fiction, grounded on significant correlations, thematic and functional, between fairy stories (as described in Tolkien’s essay) and post-apocalyptic fiction. This approach is to be thought of not as exclusive, but as complementary with other approaches.
- Tolkien’s framework reaches beyond a purely literary analysis and into “existential” themes and functions of the genres and narratives analyzed. As such, it can be very useful for identifying philosophical themes in post-apocalyptic fiction.

²¹ See note 20.

- Post-apocalyptic fiction is a genre with rich possibilities for the function that Tolkien names “Enchantment,” which describes the peculiar aesthetic effect obtained by successful fairy stories. Tolkien’s key expression for this aesthetic effect is their possibility to produce “arresting strangeness” in the reader, while I have favored the expression “outlandishness.”
- “Outlandishness” can be produced, in post-apocalyptic fiction, by recourse to some of the following motifs: the Haunting Loneliness; the Transformed Landscape; the New Rules for Survival, the New Mythos and Future Histories, the Repurposing of Common Things, and the Layered Naming of Things and People. The list is not exclusive; additions are expected and welcome.
- This aesthetic/artistic effect is described as “peculiar” to these genres, in the sense that while both may produce “outlandishness,” the effect may have different “flavors” or “textures”—for lack of a better expression—in each.
- This aesthetic effect is not *unique* to either fairy stories or post-apocalyptic fiction, but both genres can be regarded as “privileged places” for it to happen.
- Like fairy stories, post-apocalyptic fiction may aid in “Recovery,” a refreshing of the spirit from the negative form of familiarity that we call “triteness,” and which makes us experience the world as uninteresting, boring, devoid of novelty and wonder, and ultimately devoid of much meaning or much worth living for.
- Post-apocalyptic fiction accomplishes this effect through its outlandishness-causing motifs, and through the more general theme of *scarcity*.
- “Respite” (in Tolkien: “Escape”) indicates the capacity of fairy stories to provide an imaginative refuge from overwhelmingly difficult, taxing, challenging, ugly or painful realities.
- I propose that terms such as “Respite” and “Solace” may better designate Tolkien’s original meaning, as “Escape” does not imply re-engaging with challenging realities, whereas “Respite” and “Solace” imply recovering the psychic and spiritual energy to re-engage with the demands of “real life.” I take this meaning to be closer to what Tolkien intended in his essay.
- Post-apocalyptic stories can provide Respite, as artistic objects that can “draw us in” and as vehicles for narratives of resilience, perseverance and courage in the face of extremely difficult circumstances. If this is so, then their function cannot be reduced to the “expression of fears and anxieties,” for who would expose themselves to such in order to find solace?

- The “Consolation” function of fairy stories refers to their capacity to elicit *hope*, and at their best, *joy*, through the depiction of an ultimate “good turn” (or *Eucatastrophe*) after a run of difficult trials and tribulations. Typically, the (relative) virtue and goodness of the characters is instrumental in reaching that good turn.
- Unlike fairy stories (in Tolkien’s sense), post-apocalyptic fiction is *not defined* by the need of an “eucatastrophic” ending. Post-apocalyptic stories, however, map quite frequently into adventure, perhaps more than into any other “existential genre.” But the adventure genre is essentially eucatastrophic: an adventure is such if it ends well. Otherwise, it is something else. Therefore, most post-apocalyptic stories are, in fact, eucatastrophic.
- Additionally, the extremes of danger, scarcity of resources and sheer outlandishness present in post-apocalyptic stories makes them particularly apt for strong eucatastrophic resolutions, as they create a stronger tension between the difficulties and the outcome.
- The eucatastrophic resolution (the “Consolation”) can remain at a secular level, with no reference to supernatural motives for hope or joy.
- Tolkien’s understanding of the eucatastrophic involves a reference to (and even a “glimpse” into) ultimate hope and joy. While post-apocalyptic stories do not, by definition, need to align with this function, many are found that do so in a complex way, by introducing “symbol clusters” involving a sacrificial hero/savior figure, who improbably unifies conflicting factions and leads to a constructive resolution, often at a great personal cost. Often, too, these figures are couched in rich religious symbolism—prophecies, naming, a promise land.
- This aspect of post-apocalyptic narratives seems not to be a random occurrence, but connected to the nature of post-apocalyptic settings. There is an internal logic to the emergence of such symbol-clusters, as characters are faced with the need for new solutions when the “Old Ways” have failed, new solutions that need to be championed against enormous resistance and inertia. To which we may add that the extremes of the situations proposed by post-apocalyptic settings typically elicit “deep questions” about God’s presence or absence, the nature of evil, ultimate meaning and such, leading to a comparative abundance of explicit discussions of religious matter, independently of the authors’ views.

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