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Tolkien's Coleridgean Legacy

Introduction

As an Oxford don, Tolkien must have been well acquainted with the theoretical and philosophical work of Samuel Coleridge, who is one of the greatest British literati and, I daresay, progenitor of the fantasy genre in the Isles. Despite this awareness, in his published materials, Tolkien rarely ever directly named any philosophers or literary theoreticians he might have been influenced or outright inspired by in forming his own views on the origin, nature, and purpose of myth, imagination, literature, or art in general. I am aware of only two indirect references to Coleridge in the works of Tolkien that are available to me. The first is a painting entitled *Xanadu*, which is the dreamland of Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. The painting is displayed on the Tolkien Estate's website¹ and proves Tolkien must have read the poem. This is the most direct reference to Coleridge. The second, more indirect reference is found in *On Fairy-stories*, the famous essay of Tolkien's in which he laid down his understanding of the principles of art—literary art in particular. In its section on the relation of children to fairy-stories, he criticizes the concept of “**willing suspension of disbelief**” (Tolkien, 2001, p. 37). However, Tolkien here discusses the concept only in the context of Andrew Lang's comment on children's capacity for literary belief, without even hinting that Coleridge was the coiner of the phrase. Likewise, without any mention of this literary predecessor of his, Tolkien then goes on expounding, correcting, and elaborating the definitions of the same core literary terms that Coleridge examined in his *Biographia Literaria*, such as **imagination**, **fancy**, and **fantasy**.

Imagination and Creation

Coleridge outlines the distinction between **imagination** and **fancy** in Chapter IV, where he claims that—much to his dismay—despite often being used as synonyms due to their linguistic origin, the terms represent essentially different faculties of the mind. **Imagination** comes from the Latin *imagination*, which is but a translation of the Greek *phantasia*, from which **fantasy** and **fancy** are derived. Coleridge derives his understanding of these concepts from Ludovicus Vives, who defined **imagination** as the passive function of the mind whereby we perceive sensuous impressions and **phantasia** as the active function of the mind whereby we comprehend the impressions and combine them to create new thoughts. However, in Chapter XIII, Coleridge develops the definition of **imagination** to cover even the creative activity of writers, while reducing **phantasia** to the memory-based ability of the mind to construct possible scenarios deeply rooted in reality, giving it the depreciatory name of **fancy**. The best examples of fancy are the daydreams of a lover about interacting with their crush, or the catastrophic expectations of a scaredy-cat. In both cases, the mind fabricates hypothetical stories using its previous knowledge of reality

¹ <https://www.tolkienestate.com/painting/imagination/>

based on the sensuous impressions. But since it does not invent anything new beyond what already exists in reality, Coleridge finds **fancy** inferior to **imagination**. In addition, he distinguishes two kinds of imagination.

Coleridge's **primary imagination** is equated with Vives's understanding of the term. It is the universal ability of the human mind to receive impressions of the outer world, unconsciously and involuntarily recreating the image of the world in the mind. It is:

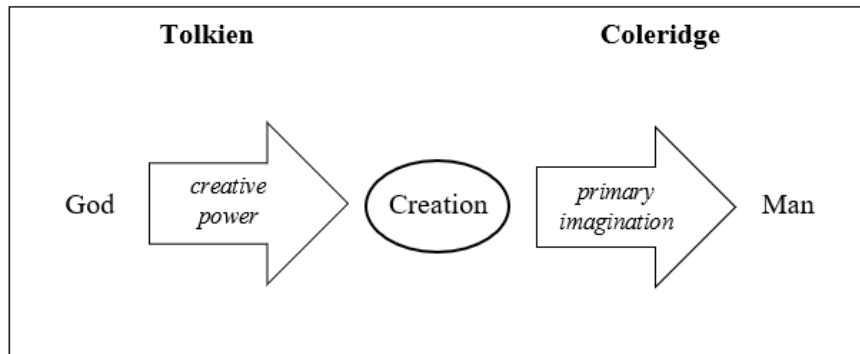
“the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”

The second part of the sentence suggests that imagination is the ability to perceive through senses and learn about God's creation. The **secondary imagination** is then:

“an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.”

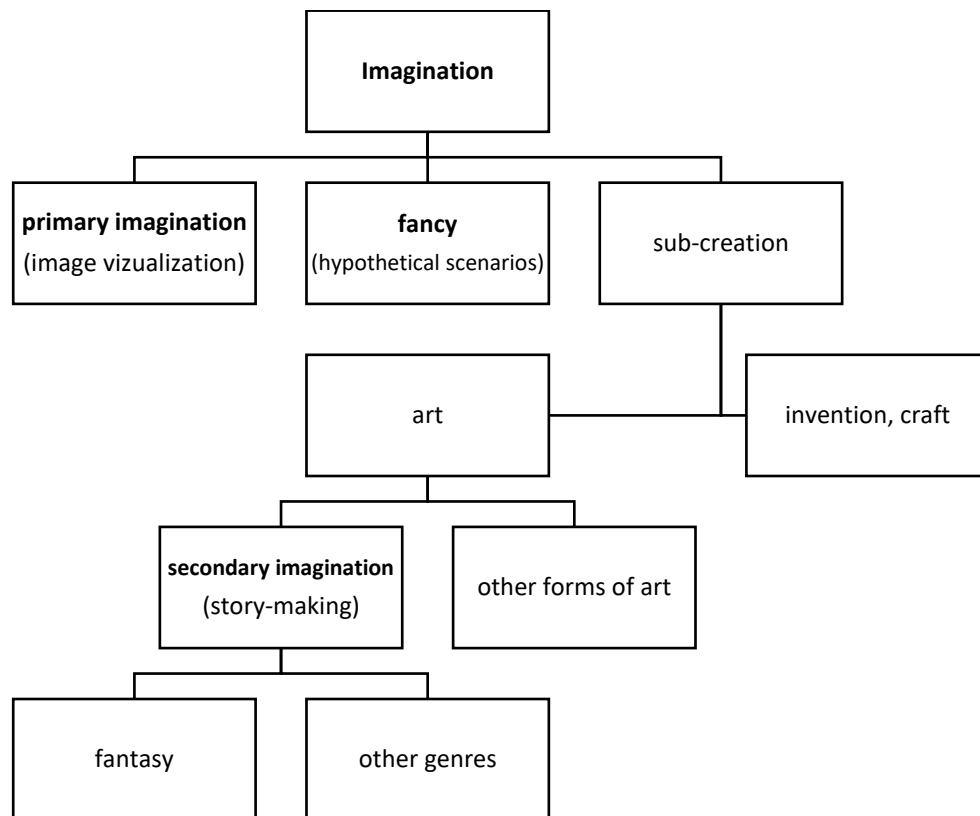
Put simply, secondary imagination denotes the imaginative ability of poets, prosaists, and dramatists.

Such twofold understanding of **imagination** brings to mind Tolkien's twofold understanding of **creation**. The proper, or so-called primary creation denotes the ability of God to make everything out of nothing, while the secondary creation—or as Tolkien terms it, **sub-creation**—refers to the creative and imaginative ability of man not only in the context of story-making but also crafting. Like Coleridge, Tolkien believes that secondary creation is analogous to primary creation, differing only in degree and mode. In addition, it is as innate a human ability as Coleridge's secondary imagination because both mirror the creative / imaginative ability of God because Man is made in His image. Thus Tolkien's sub-creation can be equated with Coleridge's secondary belief, except that Tolkien extends the meaning to include all forms of art as well as invention. The more significant difference is found on the primary level. Tolkien's concept of creation denotes the life-giving creative power of God, while Coleridge's definition of primary imagination denotes humans' perceptiveness to the resulting creation of God's. But this is just a difference in the point of view of the same creative process. The literati essentially describe the same interaction between Man and God, each from the perspective of a different one of the two opposing agents acting upon the same subject. The relation is described in the following diagram:



Fantasy

We have already established that Tolkien's sub-creation can be, in a sense, identified with Coleridge's secondary imagination. But where in the comparison do fancy and fantasy fit? Tolkien agrees with Coleridge that the capability of the human mind to form mental images of things not actually present is **imagination** (Tolkien, 2001, p. 46). In Coleridge's theory, this capability belongs to the **primary imagination**. However, Tolkien criticizes the idea that the mental processes that Coleridge covered under the concepts of secondary imagination and fancy represent entirely different faculties of the mind. Instead, he thinks that all three capabilities belong to imagination, varied only in degree, not in kind. So far, that seems to be only a conflict of terminology, and it follows that for Tolkien, sub-creation is also but a degree of imagination. But as sub-creation pertains to all forms of art and invention, story-making, which Coleridge deemed to be the only proper subject of secondary imagination, turns out to be a second-level sub-species of sub-creation. **Fantasy** as a degree of imagination whereby we make up stories detached from the reality of our Primary World—ergo fantastical—is thus a third-level subspecies of sub-creation. I tried to visualize the relation between all the concepts as well as the parallels with Coleridge's literary theory (highlighted) in another diagram:



Coleridge does not really identify any special genres or modes of imagination, except for the customary kinds of literature—prose, poetry, and drama—this division being based on the form of the text. In a side note, he considers the last two, and especially their combination—dramatic poetry—the highest means of execution of the faculty of secondary imagination. While Tolkien partially agrees with him in the case of poetry², in his opinion, the highest form of sub-creation is fantasy.

Tolkien's approach to fantasy is unique for two reasons. First, he was the first to define it as a separate literary mode or genre, which can be, to a certain degree, realized in each of the three literary formats. In Tolkien's opinion, fantasy is best realized in prose form, seconded by poetry. In drama, it can be realized only very imperfectly for reasons derived from the second point, as will be explained later. To conclude this first point, I think that Tolkien's establishing fantasy as a genre constitutes the reason why Tolkien is often nicknamed the "father of modern fantasy", although he was not the first one to write it.³

Second, Tolkien restricted fantasy solely to narrative form. In Note E to his essay *On Fairy-stories* (2001, p. 78), he explains that literature works best

² The parallels between Coleridge's and Tolkien's opinions on the artistic value of poetry are worth deeper analysis. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to cover this topic in the presented paper.

³ It is undisputable that fantastical stories had been being written long before Tolkien.

“from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive.” In his understanding, the reader's imaginative participation in the story is an essential part of fantasy as a mode of art. By visualizing the narrative in their minds, readers also become sub-creators. To paraphrase Chris Seeman (1995, p. 80), just as Man actively participates in God's creative activity, the reader participates in the writer's creative activity by the act of imagination. Thus we arrive at a second level of sub-creation, or sub-sub-creation. God is the ultimate creator, while Man-writer imitates God's primary creative power by fabricating stories and even whole universes of his own, thereby becoming a sub-creator. However, in the writer-reader relationship, the writer, in turn, becomes the god of his fabricated universe, while the reader, trying to replicate in his mind the visions of the writer set down in text, becomes a sub-creator in his turn. The visions of the writer and the reader, or even different readers, may not be identical,⁴ due to them having different experiences and having gained different impressions of the world in the process of primary imagination, but that only adds to the fantastic experience and makes literature all the more enchanting. Every attempt at its outward visualization, either via illustration or dramatization, is then detrimental to the realization of the full potential of the perceiver's imagination.⁵

While Tolkien is somewhat lenient about illustration, as he himself illustrated his stories amply, he is very critical of dramatization, particularly on-stage performance, because not only does it prohibit the spectator from active participation in the story-making, limiting him to being a mere passive recipient of somebody else's visions, but it is also more liable to outrun and even overthrow the mind (Tolkien, 2001, p. 49), leading to grotesqueness, which then makes it hard to suspend disbelief. Tolkien exemplifies his disappointment with Shakespearean drama, which, in contrast, Coleridge praises as the most quality form of art for its ability to reconcile poetic creative power and dramatic intellectual energy.

Function of literature

It is surprising that Coleridge did not see this aspect of drama as its downside when he shared views similar to Tolkien's regarding the function of literature (poetry, in his case) and the effect it should have on the reader. In chapter XIV, Coleridge writes that poetry:

“brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. [The poet] diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination.”

He continues by claiming that this power is all the while controlled by will and understanding. In Tolkien's view, fantasy likewise brings the whole soul of the

⁴ In fact, it is only rarely so.

⁵ I use the term “perceiver” to cover both the reader of textual fantasy and the spectator at a theatre play.

reader into activity and is controlled by reason (Tolkien, 2001, p. 55). For if one was not able to distinguish the fantastical from the real, he or she could not enjoy their juxtaposition in fantasy. But in order to fully submerge oneself in fantasy with the whole soul, it is not enough to pretend we do not know it is unreal. Therein exists the **willing suspension of disbelief**. It is necessary to embrace the secondary reality of the fabricated universe. This is where drama falls short. Due to it being staged and the impossibility of executing the fantastical as seamlessly as in the reader's mind, the observer can never feel fully immersed in the narrative as while reading. Instead, he or she remains only a spectator looking at the secondary world from the outside (ibid., p. 37). But drama is not the only story form susceptible to breaking the spell of **secondary belief**; any narrative form can do this if they are not able to maintain the **inner consistency of reality**. This means not only that the Secondary World is kept consistent with its inner rules, but also that its basic metaphysics and morals are consistent with those of our real Primary World. Hence good needs to be good and evil needs to be evil in the Secondary World as much as it is in the Primary World, and the same ultimate truths need to be communicated, since both worlds are rooted in and part of the eucatastrophic master story of Salvation. And this is a point on which Tolkien and Coleridge agree again. They both claim that literature (fantasy and poetry, respectively) should incite in readers a sense of wonder, a curiosity about God's creation, and help them recover a clear view freed from the bounds of science and technology and tied more to the inner vision of soul. Furthermore, it should provide pleasure as its immediate end, allowing thus for an escape from one's dreary reality. And finally, it should aim at the sublime revelation of moral and intellectual truths, the absolute of which is embodied by the ultimate Being: God.

Conclusion

I am aware that this is quite a hasty conclusion to such a complex topic, which would require almost line-by-line analysis of certain passages from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and their comparison with parallel ideas in Tolkien's theory, which we, unfortunately, do not have the time and space to do now. But I hope that this paper provides satisfactory enough proof that many of the ideas Tolkien elaborates were already at least hinted at by Coleridge or, taking it from the other side, Tolkien's literary theory incorporates Coleridge's and is a revision and an extension thereof, consciously or subconsciously.

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