

LITERARY
APOLOGETICS: A SPELL
FOR THE REFRESHMENT
OF THE SPIRIT

Annie Crawford on Why Stories Matter

*I had always felt life first as a story: and if
there is a story there is a storyteller.¹*

~ G.K. Chesterton

As Christian apologists, we at *An Unexpected Journal* seek to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith. In modern culture, this endeavor has most frequently taken the form of propositional argument. However, the founders of *An Unexpected Journal* believe that apologists might more effectively draw unbelievers toward Christ if we, like Chesterton, learn to feel life first not as a propositional statement but as a story. As creatures dwelling in time, we experience reality in narrative

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 61.

form. All things come to us through the vector of time, and we have not a single experience that was unshaped by a beginning, middle, and end. We may know many things through rational propositions and poetic metaphor, yet a temporal narrative is the framework that gives these other modes of knowledge their context and meaning. We live and think within a real story. Thus, if we wish to help others more fully understand and accept the truth of Christianity, we must tell stories. This is the work of literary apologetics: the creation and explication of narratives which embody the Gospel Story. Through the enjoyment of narrative art, we can behold and witness to the truth of Christ.

Christianity is above all a story: the True Myth that tells the creation of mankind, our fall into sin, and our eucatastrophic redemption. The Gospel is a love story that ends in an eternal marriage. For those who belong to the Bride, it is the Glorious Comedy; for those who reject the Bridegroom, it is the Greatest Tragedy. We do not ultimately live within a creed or a syllogism, but within this epic narrative. The purpose of life is to become part of the Great Story ourselves - or more accurately, to choose which role we will play in it.

The Gospel Story is the metanarrative which frames, forms, and gives meaning to all our abstract doctrines. Through the story of creation,

we know what it means to have a relationship with God as our Father. Through the story of the crucifixion and resurrection, we know what it means for God to be our Redeemer and our victorious Warrior. Without reference to a story, our theological claims and propositions have no actual meaning. We cannot know what a savior is except through reference to a salvation story. Yet the Biblical narratives are not simply heuristic vehicles for the delivery of doctrine. The Gospel Story is the reality which our theological explanations seek to serve. We do not tell these stories merely to explain the creeds of the Christian faith. Instead, we have developed creeds and catechisms so we might better understand the Gospel Story in which we live. The doctrine of original sin helps us understand the story of the fall so we might make better sense of our need for salvation. The doctrine of the incarnation helps us understand the nativity story so we might know that God Himself has become a part of our story and we have become a part of His.

If the Gospel is first and foremost a story, then we must also tell stories in order to fully understand and witness to it. We tell stories because our Father is telling us a story, and the medium and the message cannot be separated. The

form of a thing – a story, a song, or a creed – cannot be altered without altering its meaning. When we move from a narrative medium to an expository medium, we inevitably change the meaning of the message. If we replace a great story such as the *Iliad* or *The Lord of the Rings* or the Gospel itself with a summary or a thematic analysis or a moral lesson, the story *qua* story is destroyed. To read a summary of the *Iliad* is not to have read the *Iliad*, for this epic tale is by no means reducible to the bare outlines of a plot. A well-crafted story works upon the soul at many levels: the rational, the imaginative, the moral, the aesthetic, and the subconscious. Any form other than the original will not work upon the soul in the same way. For example, many of our favorite stories draw us vicariously into narrow escapes from great dangers. The thrill of escape that we feel when reading a good adventure tale is an essential part of the story which cannot be replicated by reading a summary of the plot. The meaning which the summary imprints on our soul is not equivalent to the meaning imprinted by the original work.

Our doctrines and intellectual formulations are important servants to the Gospel, but they cannot function as substitutes for it. God is not seeking to win a debate with us; He is inviting us into a living

story. In his *Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis notes that the “abstraction of content and words seems to do such violence to great literature.”² When we extract a particular point out of its narrative context, we perform a kind of dissection, and while we can learn much from the work of dissection, the original life of the object is destroyed through the dismemberment. The greater the work of art, the greater the violence of the abstraction. Yet there is no work of art greater than the cosmos itself and no story greater than the Gospel; if we reduce the Great Story into a mere set of abstract propositions, we do it great violence. Yet narrative art, by imitating the true form of the Gospel, can embody the hope we have in Christ and become itself a foretaste of the joy to which it testifies. A joyful story will tutor us in the joy of the Gospel better than any propositional doctrine.

Thus, an effective literary apologist does not simply use stories as illustrations of Christian doctrine. Our stories should not serve our propositions; our propositions should serve our Story. Lewis protests that to value novels or narrative poems “chiefly for reflections which they

² C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 88-90.

may suggest to us or morals we may draw from them is a flagrant instance of "using" instead of "receiving" a work of art.³ We ought not "use" a story as a means to some other end, whether entertainment, moral exhortation, or doctrinal support. Instead of "using" literature in the service of other ends, Lewis argues that we must "receive" stories on their own terms. Stories exist for us to enter, not for us to use. This is the true meaning of "art for art's sake." Art awakens us to the cosmic work of Divine Art in which we live, and likewise, stories helps us enter more fully into the Divine Story. When we "receive" a story, we humble ourselves to become a participant in the narrative rather than reducing the story to a pragmatic tool we can use for separate purposes. The literary apologist carefully creates a dialectic between narrative and propositional ways of knowing wherein the latter serves the former. We step out of our narratives in order to analyze and deepen our understanding, but the purpose of this stepping out of them is then, after having readjusted our lens and cleared the fog from our vision, to plunge back into the story where we truly belong. The goal of literary apologetics is not to extract some abstract

³ Lewis, *Experiment*, 82-83.

truth or moral principle from a story but to facilitate the ability of narrative art to transform us in ways which fit us for participation in the Great Story.

Because we are made in the image of God, all our stories are windows into the Great Story, which, as Aslan explained, He is telling us all the time.⁴ Our narrative art is derivative art; it is not genuine creation *ex nihilo*, but as J.R.R. Tolkien calls it, sub-creation.⁵ All our stories derive their form and meaning from the Great Narrative. As the Imago Dei shapes every human soul, so the Gospel story is the archetype shaping every human story. Lewis contends that “an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom.”⁶ For Lewis, a story is a lens which enables the reader to “see through it” to “something

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 247.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories: Expanded Edition with Commentary and Notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 59.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 9.

else.”⁷ A bad story blurs our vision of the world, but a good story will be a clear, well focused lens which offers a window to the true world. The purpose of all our story-telling is to express the Great Story through a joyful variation, as a prism refracts and reflects the light in a thousand ways.

All our stories are inevitably iterations of the Gospel Story because every narrative creates from the same basic material. When an author crafts a new story, she draws from the images, objects, symbols, and meanings that are already present in the world. These forms are themselves the products of God’s creative thought and the fundamental building blocks of his Great Story. Therefore, in a very real way, we are “thinking God’s thoughts after Him” and re-telling His story.⁸ As the Teacher of Ecclesiastes perceived, “There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”⁹ While God can create out of utterly nothing, the human imagination can only take the things God has made and rearrange them. This rearrangement

⁷ Lewis, *Experiment*, 31.

⁸ Commonly attributed to Johannes Kepler.

⁹ Eccles. 1:9-10.

can take an infinite variety of forms; the human capacity for creativity is truly great, but it cannot produce that which is truly novel. In his essay, “The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture,” George MacDonald contends that the human imagination

Has created none of the material that goes to make [its] forms. Nor does it work upon raw material. But it takes forms already existing, and gathers them about a thought so much higher than they, that it can group and subordinate and harmonize them into a whole which shall represent [and] unveil that thought.¹⁰

Our creative inventions - a hobbit, a hippogriff, or a bowtruckle - are new in the sense of being unique combinations, but they are composite forms which contain nothing absolutely new. No matter how sophisticated, all our thoughts and narrative creations are composed of forms which have already been given by God through nature.

Yet, if we do not ever invent utterly new forms, then neither do we invent utterly new meanings, for every form in nature contains some kind of inherent meaning. MacDonald contends that “the meanings are in [the] forms already; else they could

¹⁰ George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, from Project Gutenberg, accessed October 10, 2017, ., Kindle loc. 254-256.

be no garment of unveiling.”¹¹ For example, when Jesus wanted to teach His disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven, He described the form and life of a mustard plant. From a tiny, single seed grows the “largest of garden plants [which] becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”¹² The form of a large, branching tree evokes not only a sense of steadfast, enduring life but also one of diversity within unity. Because this meaning is inherent to the form of the tree, accessible to any person who has seen one, Christ could present the tree as a “garment of unveiling” to His disciples. And if the forms we use as sub-creators contain inherent meanings, then our creations also contain inherent meanings which are independent of our own construction. According to MacDonald, an author’s work “must mean more than he meant . . . It is God’s things, His embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use . . . therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen.”¹³ We can tell many stories that employ the imagery of a tree,

¹¹ MacDonald, Kindle loc. 86-88.

¹² Matt. 13:32.

¹³ Ibid., Kindle loc. 3532-3537.

and we can think about a tree in many ways, but none of our imaginative constructs will ever change the essential nature of a tree which was spoken into being by God. A poet does not give meaning to a tree; the tree already contains meaning which the poet mines and explores. Since human creation is always derivative, the meanings we create through our own stories and expositions are always commentaries upon the meaning God has already embedded in the world around us. We do not create new truths; we only explore, expound, and explicate those truths and meanings which God has already given us.

Thus, composed of forms that carry inherent, objective meanings, every story will communicate the True Story to some degree. A Christian author will intentionally write stories that build Christian meaning within the imagination of a reader. Yet whether she accepts the Gospel story or not, MacDonald contends that any good author will assemble her narrative “according to the harmony of truths already embodied in each of the parts,”¹⁴ for this is the only way to create a meaningful and pleasing unity. In so far as a story is aesthetically successful, it will echo that original unity from

¹⁴ MacDonald, Kindle loc. 95-96.

which its forms were drawn. Because human artists are always sub-creators, who work with the forms that God has already created and invested with inherent meaning, any good story will be a reflection on the Great Story. As MacDonald explains, an author “who, in harmony with nature, attempts the discovery of more of her meanings, is just searching out the things of God.”¹⁵ As an author explores and develops the inner meaning of the forms that compose her narrative, she is in truth exploring the Great Narrative.

Even when authors fail to harmonize the truths embodied in the forms of their narrative, their stories still testify to the true meaning of things through the dissonance created by their misuse. If a great oak tree were used to symbolize something fragmented, fickle, or fleeting, the reader would experience imaginative discord. The author would not have crafted a story that drew out the inherent meaning of a tree, and the dissonance of that contradiction would testify to its true meaning. Whether by positive development or dissonant contradiction, every artist is always working with the truth on some level. All stories testify to the immutable, inescapable narrative unfolding

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc. 233-237.

throughout the cosmos. Therefore, we can explore the Gospel through any story - from either Dante's ecstatic vision or Hemingway's poignant nihilism. There is joy in the embrace of divine life and absurdity in its rejection. Both experiences lead us toward the objective truth of the Gospel Story, as well as help us more fully comprehend its meaning.

Because we can perceive the truth through any story, we do not need to find ways to make people read "Christian" stories or watch "Christian" movies in order to share the Gospel with them; we can engage someone through the stories they already love. A literary apologist can work with the narrative meanings which someone has already enjoyed, and the more truly someone loves a story, the more likely that story echoes the Great Story and provides fertile soil in which Gospel truths can grow. According to Lewis, great literature will strike roots of meaning far below the surface of the mind.¹⁶ In this way, narrative art can sneak Gospel truths past what Lewis calls the "watchful dragons"¹⁷ of bias or inhibition. Through the wonder and pleasure of a good story, a reader will

¹⁶ Lewis, *Experiment*, 49.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1994), 37.

imaginatively engage truths which in another context they would be likely to resist. Consider the way in which many avid Harry Potter fans would never respond to an altar call, yet through their love of Harry's tale of self-sacrifice they have imaginatively embraced the Gospel theme of death unto resurrection. Millions of people love this postmodern epic because it potently harmonizes the contemporary imagination with the True Story for which they were made, yet the pagan trappings of the witches and wizards have well-hidden the Gospel meanings from the watchful dragons. By engaging stories that have already been enjoyed, the literary apologist can unfold the true implications of meanings that have already begun to grow within the reader's soul. The literary apologist need not convince the Harry Potter fan to love the Gospel; he can simply reveal how they have already come to love much of the Gospel story through their enjoyment of Harry's story. Furthermore, we can cultivate such growth from any narrative seed, whether deep and mythic or shallow and fanciful. As Lewis observes, the way to cultivate a love of literature in a man is not to "denigrate his present favourites but to teach him

how to enjoy something better.”¹⁸ We can begin with any sincere enjoyment of any story, for all stories are windows into the Great Story. The apologist’s role is to raise up a mirror to the reader’s soul and illuminate that which is already in him.¹⁹

Curiously, the more stories we tell, the better we will understand the one True Story. It is not enough to simply recite the Gospel over and over. We need a diversity of narratives to help us comprehend the full meaning of the Great Narrative. Just as a child needs to play with her puppy in order to deeply understand the nature of this furry creature, so we need to play with stories in order to understand the nature of the True Story. By playing with the elements of the divine pattern, our diverse stories bring eternal truths into vivid relief. We can play with the idea of frogs turning into princes, but we realize that evil in any form can never finally overcome good. We can imagine hobbits walking the *via dolorosa*, but it is inconceivable for redemption to be won without sacrifice. In the multitude of our sub-created stories, both real and imagined, MacDonald perceives that “the echoes of the word of truth

¹⁸ Lewis, *Experiment*, 112.

¹⁹ MacDonald, Kindle loc. 3523-3525.

gather volume and richness from every soul that re-echoes it to brother and sister souls.”²⁰ We are not able to see the whole reality from our own limited perspective, but through literature we can enter into the experiences of others and thereby see more clearly the Great Narrative that is shaping all our lives. Lewis concludes his *Experiment in Criticism* by remembering “the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors,”²¹ for “in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.” Lewis explains that through the art of telling stories, “as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”²² The more we encounter incarnations of the Great Story, the more vibrantly we see its unifying form and our place in it.

In this way, literary apologetics serves not only the unbeliever but also the believer. A good story will also help Christians recover and renew their love for the Gospel which, in this broken and dying world, is all too easily worn thin. Entropy decays our understanding as well as our bodies; our

²⁰ MacDonald, Kindle loc. 267.

²¹ Lewis, *Experiment*, 140.

²² *Ibid.*, 141.

memories grow dim and our ideas become stale. Even our good intentions are not enough to keep from decay the full meaning of truths we hold dear. Indeed, our very efforts to “meditate on the law of the Lord day and night” can create what Tolkien calls a “blur of triteness or familiarity,”²³ for as G.K. Chesterton observes, “grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony.”²⁴ But thanks be to God that He does not suffer from our feeble stupidity. Contemplating the faithful cycles of nature, Chesterton imagines “that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon . . . He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”²⁵ The joy and beauty of being does not fade for God. It may be that God delights to bid us “Encore! Tell me the Great Story again!” Yet he grants to us the creative space of *la différence* so we might make infinite variations on the divine theme. Given the grace of a different context or arrangement of parts, worn out meanings become alive again. New stories resurrect the dry bones of old truths and

²³ Tolkien, 67.

²⁴ Chesterton, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

give what MacDonald describes as “a new form to the thought – a form which makes us feel the truth of it afresh.”²⁶ And with their freshness these new composite forms also bring a deeper and wider understanding. In this way, we have the joy and honor of being invited as sub-creators to partner with God in co-creation of our world. Our stories magnify and become a part of the Great Story.

In his essay, “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien notes it is a “small wonder that *spell* means both a story told, and a formula of power over living man.”²⁷ The stories we tell are powerful. Our narratives tell us who we are: where we have come from, where we are going, and who we will become. With the modern narrative of materialistic evolution and our singular hope in technology, we are more than ever in danger of forgetting who we really are. What it means to be human will be the central question that apologists must answer in the post human twenty-first century. Yet literary apologists can help us remember who we truly are by leading us to the great stories, both old and new. With careful attention and joyful cultivation, our stories can become like Lucy’s spell “for the refreshment of

²⁶ MacDonald, Kindle loc. 274-275.

²⁷ Tolkien, 48.

spirit,”²⁸ reminding us of our place in the Great Story, that loveliest story we’ve ever read or ever shall read, which goes on forever with every chapter better than the one before.²⁹

²⁸ Lewis, *Treader*, 156-157.

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 211.

Bibliography

Literary Apologetics: A Spell for the Refreshment of the Spirit

Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*. Garden City, NY. Doubleday, 1959.

Lewis, C.S. "Christianity and Culture." in *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections*. ed. Walter Hooper. New York. Ballantine, 1992.

-- -- --. "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said." in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. Orlando. Harcourt, 1994.

-- -- --. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2013.

Lewis, C.S. *The Last Battle*. New York. HarperCollins, 1995.

-- -- --. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. New York. HarperCollins, 1995.

MacDonald, George. *A Dish of Orts*. Project Gutenberg. accessed October 10, 2017.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tolkien On Fairy-stories: Expanded Edition with Commentary and Notes*. ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. London. HarperCollins, 2014.