



World Building and Sub-creators: An Artist's Approach to Resurrection

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Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay “Death of the Author” contends that it is time for the Author’s life and intent to stop limiting texts. Why keep a text chained to its author’s life, times, and narrow ideas? For Barthes it is time to set texts and readers free, and to do this the Author must die. Texts ought to become a place where the limiting factor of the Author is itself eliminated and replaced by a Scriptor, by a hand that merely writes the text which has eternally existed. As Barthes says, “Linguistically, the author is never anything more than the instance writing” (145). This Scriptor does not come with a biography, an intention, or a personality that curtail the possibilities of meaning contained in the text. Rather, since the Scriptor erases these Authorial lines of demarcation, readers can now come to texts with as varied an array of interpretive notions as there are people! They can create their own plurality of mutually exempting meanings for themselves. Barthes explains, “Writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning”; it is in fact a “refus[al] to fix meaning” (147). According to him, one can never truly know the author behind



the text nor can the author truly know him or herself with all of his or her socio-historical inputs that went into the writing of the text. Therefore, either the author must die so the text can live on in various forms in the minds of readers, or meaning does not exist at all. As Barthes summarises in his essay's final statement: "to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

Two years later, Michel Foucault continued on the subject Barthes began with the essay "What is an Author?" Here, Foucault argues that leaving the text to silently speak for itself in a plurality of ceaseless meaning ensures rather than avoids the Author's survival; according to him, making writing transcendental "sustains the privileges of the author through the safeguard of the a priori; the play of representations that formed a particular image of the author is extended within a grey neutrality" (120). Barthes may have finalised the death of the Author, but the Author's spirit lives on. Foucault describes how what he calls the "author function" defines and limits the meanings and receptions of a work, collection of works, or system of ideas which he calls discourses. While he believes the limitation provided by the author function could be a good thing, the definition of "author" (which is as much to say the identity of the author) is for him, as for Barthes, multiple and unknowable. This multiplicity of unknowable identity causes works also to be tenuous in meaning: "in fact, all discourse that supports this 'author function' is characterised by this plurality of egos" (130). The relationship between author and work is simply too controlling and too confused. To remedy this situation, Foucault suggests that what readers should examine is neither the author nor the work, but "the empty space left by the author's disappearance...its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance" (121). In other words, to preserve meaning in art, readers must look for meaning in a different place. That place is not the author's

intent or the work's expression but rather the "system of dependencies" created by the "author-function," and in "the manner in which discourse is articulated on the basis of social relationships" (137). Essentially, the way to preserve meaning in art is to consider why and what art does to the society around it. And within this ethics of writing and reading, Foucault astutely closes his essay where it began: with the question "What [does it] matter who's speaking?" (138). Now, neither author nor text matter; all that lives for readers to examine is a society of discourse. Therefore, if Barthes does away with the author and "its" biography in favour of the reader, Foucault does away with the author and "its" work in favour of the biography of the work's society.

It would seem then that readers—or to use a word, for now, that would include a broader cross-section of the arts, "consumers"—are to be ever trapped in a Postmodernistic rat-race between killing the artist by denying the existence of an actual person on the one hand and, on the other, ignoring the work of art completely to instead focus on the socio-historical interplay of discursivity stimulated by that artwork. This latter focus goes back to biographical criticism anyway, except now the biographical criticism is centred not just on one author but on an entire society. What results from the rat-race is the death of the author, the dissolution of the text, and the denial of the individual approach of the consumer, leaving only an army of aesthetic zombies walking around in a field called Art, desperately awaiting resurrection. Sad, I know.

But then there are Clive Staples Lewis and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. I am here to suggest that they, perhaps inadvertently, posed a concept which goes far in solving the problems that Barthes and Foucault noticed and tried to answer. That concept is sub-creation: participating in a secondary world. In Lewis and Tolkien's minds, this participation is something reader and writer, both alive and well, do in the world built sub-creatively, which world is a real, coherent

space. We will learn more about what exactly sub-creativity is as we one-by-one progress through Tolkien and Lewis's views on Author, Text, and Reader, for sub-creation plays the vital role in each station and can best be grasped in conjunction with the functions it performs. But for now, let us begin with what Lewis and Tolkien believed about the role the author plays in sub-creation.

Toward the beginning of "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien observes that "the incarnate mind, the tongue and the tale are in our world coeval" (21-22). Whereas Barthes would say that "to write is...to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'" (143), and thereby makes authorship and writing mutually exclusive, Tolkien contends that the act of writing, the act of making art, maintains author, text, and reader on an equal footing one with the other. In this perspective, the author is alive and kicking. More so, the author uses his imagination and reason to their fullest extent, for it is the duty of the sub-creative artist to flip adjectives and fuse nouns, recreating the world with the elements of the world: "[I]n such 'fantasy,' as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator" ("On Fairy-Stories" 22). Here the artist comes to life and we begin to understand what Tolkien means by "the incarnate mind." What goes on in the author's head is precisely the reimagination of the world he already knows, our world, and that active work becomes incarnate in the art he makes, in the world he builds. Tolkien further stresses the animation of the author when he explains how the "faculty of conceiving images...called the Imagination" must be in a sub-creator combined with the "the achievement of expression which gives... 'the inner consistency of reality,'" which he calls Art ("On Fairy-Stories" 46-47). And this Art is the faculty by which Imagination leads to Sub-creation. None of these activities—Imagination, Art, and consequently Sub-creation—are passive. No, these are signs of life. Lewis compliments Tolkien's assertion of the author's life in

his essay "On Science Fiction" which claims, "The proper study of man as artist is everything which gives foothold to the imagination and the passions" (61). Imagination and passion, reason and romance, are tools the artist must harness to create a work. The artist has a soul, the artist breathes, the artist is alive.

The vitality of the soul proves an important point on which to dwell for Lewis and Tolkien, because in their view the power of sub-creativity is derivative. We have reviewed a little of what it means to be "creative." Now we must put the "sub" into "sub-creator." To begin, let us be reminded that in the mindset of sub-creation, everything the artist does is a recreation of the world around him - recombined adjectives and nouns, as we previously mentioned. This not only proves the author is alive, but it also causes life in the author by giving him hope through what Tolkien called "recovery." By artistically selecting elements of history and nature and reimagining them in different forms to create secondary worlds, the artist must first know actual history and nature. He must "look at green again, and be startled anew" and realise that "if no young man had ever fallen in love by chance meeting with a maiden, and found old enmities to stand between him and his love, then the god Frey would never have seen Gedr the giant's daughter from the high seat of Odin" ("On Fairy-Stories" 56-57, 30). Only after recovering a right view and appreciation of the Primary world can the author sub-create from that world his secondary one. In this sense, sub-creation is derivative.

But also on a deeper level is this derivation true, for in building a secondary world, the artist must imbue his people and places with life and story, and that life and story—that soul—is derived from his own life, not in the sense of the content of his biography, but in the essence of the life he has been given. According to Tolkien, the objects a sub-creator reimagines are only arrayed "with a personal significance and glory by a gift, the gift of a person, the gift of a man.

Personality can only be derived from a person." Likewise, the sub-creator's "peoples live...by the same life just as in the mortal world do kings and peasants" ("On Fairy-Stories" 24). Art is all derivative. Human creativity is sub-creative. Here the author cannot be limiting because he has been freed from all possession. All the artist does is the very hard work of beautifully breathing worlds of art into existence from elements of the world into which he has already been placed with the life he has already been given. This is not dark magic possession, but light magic reflection. No wonder Lewis said that the mythopoeic (that is, sub-creative art) is "a mode of imagination which does something to us at a deep level" ("On Science Fiction" 67). Sub-creation calls all artists to delve into reality and that which sustains reality. Of course the author will come alive. In the process, he might even change.

The poetry of Tolkien and Lewis belie their belief in the personhood of the artist, and thus it is there that we will close this section of our journey into sub-creation. Lewis's poem "Wormwood" encapsulates what it means for human life to be derivative, while Tolkien's "Mythopoeia" could be viewed as the cornerstone work for the philosophy of active sub-creation.

"The heart of Man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind."

~From "Mythopoeia" by J. R. R. Tolkien

"How should man live save as glass
To let the white light without flame, the Father, pass
Unstained: or else—opaque, molten to thy desire,
Venus infernal starving in the strength of fire!"
~Lines 13-16 of "Wormwood" by C. S. Lewis

Now let us proceed from the sub-creative author to the sub-creation itself. This work of art, or as we could call it the "originally reimagined" world, is a solid and real entity. Where Foucault says that those who believe bypassing the author still leaves the author's work intact "have failed to appreciate the equally problematic nature of the word 'work' and the unity it designates" (119), Tolkien and Lewis believe that the sub-created secondary world is a true place which both author and reader, artist and consumer, can enter, and this not through the negative suspension of disbelief but through the positive secondary belief the artist inspires. Rather than an undefined space left void by the death of the author, a successful secondary world and belief "demands a special skill, a kind of elvish craft," is a "rare achievement of Art" ("On Fairy-Stories" 49), and according to both Lewis and Tolkien more often than not speaks of things and ideas more real than what one would encounter in normal, everyday "real life." After all, as we have seen, sub-creation uses the elements of "real life" but, with a little bit of "recovery," reinvents their presentation in such a way that deeper aspects of living can be seen more clearly by both artist and consumer.

First of all, then, Secondary worlds or sub-created artwork are real and alive in that they are filled with real things, more real in a sense than the young technological advances of our day. As Tolkien rather bluntly put it, "Fairy-stories, at any rate, have many more permanent and fundamental things to talk about. Lightning for example. The escapist is not so subservient to the whims of evanescent fashion as these opponents" ("On Fairy-Stories" 61). We will examine the idea of escape in a moment, but for now note the reality of lightning versus lightbulbs and horses

versus automobiles. However, I readily admit that this is not the type of reality with which Barthes and Foucault took issue when determining the identity of works in society. No, they struggled with the definition of a work itself, not its contents.

To answer this conundrum, I believe Lewis and Tolkien's idea of Secondary belief and what it accomplishes becomes vital. The author's degree of success in making a self-consistent work of art—essentially his success as an artist—determines the degree of reality via secondary belief inspired in the consumer. In "On Stories," Lewis focuses on the importance of the atmosphere, style, and pure story—the quality of believable imagination—that a sub-created world must have. True artistry sub-creates a work that can be willingly and seamlessly entered into by the consumer, because the artist has already willingly entered into it himself. This world is clearly demarcated and identifiable due to the very building-blocks and tone that form the structure of the world. There will be firmness, texture, colouring, and depth in a sub-created world, and all layered over with a spell of consistency that beckons for belief. Along with Tolkien the philologist, we can enjoy the "small wonder that *spell* means both a story told, and a formula of power over living men" ("On Fairy-Stories" 31). The "spell" here referred to, the magic of artistic enchantment, is the magic belonging to Fairy stories and to world building, and because all art creates space, all art involves a degree of that magical world-building. True art is an enterable space.

I would be remiss to not highlight the artistic advantages escape offers. "On Fairy-Stories" shows Tolkien is very concerned to remind his readers that to create secondary belief, to enable escape and build a secondary world, "is a rational, not an irrational, activity," and that fantasy "does not blur the sharp outlines of the real world; for it depends on them" (82). The goal of escape only foments an artist's aesthetic desire, only causes better world building, only causes

higher delight in the work of art. Tolkien's essay therefore contains this delightful quote: "Many stories out of the past have only become 'escapist' in their appeal through surviving from a time when men were as a rule delighted with the work of their hands into our time, when many men feel disgust with man-made things" ("On Fairy-Stories" 65). Here is a call to delight in the work humans make, and in what one's own self makes. The final result will only be more real and more beautiful.

However, there is a final and deeper way in which sub-creative artwork is real and active, and that is in the theme of the artwork. As seen before, Foucault hints that sacrificing some of a work's theme to instead examine the mode of discourse surrounding that art in society could be desirable. Lewis and Tolkien would readily and adamantly reply that one cannot have one without the other! The theme causes the mode of discourse, and one would be studying nothingness if one neglected the theme for the reaction. According to Lewis and Tolkien, true art will touch on deeper regions of reality.

And this is where we turn to escape. Primarily, both men emphasise the *integrity* of good escape. One tenet of Tolkien's theory in "On Fairy-Stories" is that escape from the humdrum disfigurement of real life helps reveal the ugliness of evil and the beauty of goodness, thereby releasing consumers from the prison of their, in the grand scheme of things, untrue lives (see 64-65). Thus he is able to state, "Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic" ("On Fairy-Stories" 60). Lewis, too, champions positive escape in "On Stories," where he says that world building can be very useful for returning to 'real life' because Story pierces into something deeper, tries to catch in its net of plot something that is not successive and more real: "It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense, but it sets before us an image of what reality may be like at some more central region" (15). If one is escaping to what what reality may

be like at some more central region, then one is escaping to a very good thing. In another essay of his, this time called "On Realisms," Lewis reinforces the idea that escape is not only good but important to living a good real life when he points out that "the authors who lead us furthest into impossible regions—Sidney, Spenser, and Morris—were men active and stirring in the real world" (70). In this sense, then, escape causes art to be more real, not less so.

If recovery is a means of resurrection for the artist, then escape is the vehicle of resurrection for the text. It encourages the artwork to be more real, more vivid, and also draws everyone who participates in the sub-creation to be reminded of the deeper realities, the visceral longings, of what it means to be human and alive. It follows that Tolkien would say: "And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this....But so do other stories...and so do other studies" ("On Fairy-Stories" 67). Yes, sub-created art, whether it be a text or a game or a picture hanging on a wall, is a very powerful thing. So powerful it could almost be believed to be real.

I will again close this section with a sampling of "Mythopoeia" by Tolkien as well as an excerpt from "The Future of Forestry" by Lewis. The lines from "Mythopoeia" remind us of the truths which escape opens to us through secondary worlds, while Lewis's poem imagines how fantasy stories could come into being after true reality - in this case the flora of England - is long forgotten.

"Yet trees are not 'trees', until so named and seen
and never were so named, till those had been
who speech's involuted breath unfurled [...]
free captives undermining shadowy bars,
digging the foreknown from experience
and panning the vein of spirit out of sense.
Great powers they slowly brought out of themselves
and looking backward they beheld the elves
that wrought on cunning forges in the mind,
and light and dark on secret looms entwined."
~From "Mythopoeia" by J. R. R. Tolkien

"What was a chestnut?
Say what it means to climb a Beanstalk.
Tell me, grandfather, what an elm is.
What was Autumn? They never taught us.
Then, told by teachers how once from mould
Came growing creatures of lower nature
Able to live and die, though neither
Beast nor man, and around them wreathing
Excellent clothing, breathing sunlight—
Half-understanding, their ill-acquainted
Fancy will tint their wonder-paintings
—Trees as men walking, wood-romances
Of goblins stalking in silky green,
Of milk-sheen froth upon the lace of hawthorn's
Collar, pallor on the face of birch girl.
So shall a homeless time, though dimly,
Catch from afar (for soul is watchful)
A sight of tree-delighted Eden."
~Lines 10-27 of "The Future of Forestry" by C. S. Lewis

But time is flying, and we must move on. We have seen that artists are alive and that artwork can live, too. But what then of the consumers of the artwork these artists produce? Are they crushed by the huge dosage of reality they have just been given?

By no means. Consumers, too, bring their own selves to art; they too infuse the work with their own meanings. Barthes and Foucault were right in noting that readers have new discoveries when they approach texts. But does this mean the author is dead and the text ultimately

meaningless? Or does the author's life truly limit what a text means to his own biographical experiences and notions? No, argue Lewis and Tolkien, because of sub-creation. We have seen that sub-creators borrow meaning from the universe and that which is above the universe. Well, *so do all consumers*. In fact, I have just decided to change my mind. "Consumer" is not a good word for what receivers of art do after all. It is much too passive. The reality is that everyone is an active sub-creator, including readers. As Tolkien spells out in "Mythopoeia," sub-creation "was our right / (used or misused). That right has not decayed." Everyone participates in the meaning of subcreation, whether he or she be author or reader. Everyone comes with his or her own story and self to a piece of art, and thereby finds new and different realities in the sub-created world. This is why rereading is such an important mark of the literary reader for Lewis, as seen in his essays "On Stories," "On Science Fiction," "On Myth," and "On Realisms." The more one can put into a story the more one will get out of it. In fact, in "On Myth" Lewis goes so far as to say, "[T]he degree to which any story is a myth depends very largely on the person who hears or reads it... We must never assume that we know exactly what is happening when anyone else reads a book" (48). It seems that, in a way, participants, as I shall now call them, do a good deal of sub-creation themselves whenever they enter a secondary world. This may be hard to swallow for many avid readers and critics, but perhaps gamers will find this easier to agree with. You are in a sub-created world which has its own real, authentic, meaning-driven sub-creator, but you are also participating in the world and making it as you go. Is this not so?

You see, human creativity is a sub-creativity that originally reimagines the unfathomable (but not unknowable) deeper elements of life into capturable works of art, whether it is a text, painting, or video game. Because sub-creators borrow from a wealth of larger meaning, and the meaning they grasp is inextricably connected to that vast storehouse, there will always be more

to find in a sub-creation than the author originally thought of. Therefore, sub-creation allows all sub-creators to find meaning in the built world, whether they be formal artists or casual participants, so that sub-creation not only never ignores the author's infused meaning but also never stops there. Meaning is not cast aside; it is advanced, and everyone is still alive and well. Sub-creation, a true feat of world building, creates a work that is alive, alive enough to inspire a secondary belief (derived from primary belief) that is so powerful it sustains both author and reader in that world as they participate in meaning together.

Perhaps the most significant activity performed by a participant of sub-created works is the change he or she undergoes. This change I think can be rightfully linked to the consolation so integral and conclusive to "On Fairy-Stories". Tolkien makes it eminently clear in this essay that consolation speaks of another—I have been saying "deeper" but perhaps at this point "higher" is a better choice—world of meaning, the one from which our own world is derived. It reads, "The consolation of fairy-stories....does not deny the existence of...sorrow or failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies...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" (68). And later he describes the sudden turn of the eucatastrophe as something from which "we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through....Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (69-70, 71). For the participant in sub-creation, consolation lets something from outside our world into our world. It allows the participant to snatch a sight of truth, and thereby be forever changed, much like Frodo was forever changed after his adventures and eucatastrophe. As Tolkien affirms, this "is a serious and dangerous matter" ("On Fairy-Stories" 71). Yes, participants play a lively, sub-creative part

whenever they approach a sub-created world. Beware, then, for we participants are alive, and very well could "be so changed that we can throw our nets away and follow the bird to its own country" ("On Stories 20). On this point Lewis chooses not to expound in his essay "On Stories," but he does think this change "is sometimes done—or very, very nearly done—in stories" (20).

Essentially, the key to keeping the author, the text, and the reader alive is simply subcreation, the art of the original reimagination of actual life. Perhaps some of you are still thinking this is just a bunch of childish escapism, all this leaving to another place by secondary belief. After all, claiming this form of resurrection could easily sound like a cop-out: "just artistically sub-create and solve over a century of critical conundrums!" I follow your thoughts, because this is the original attack which Tolkien and Lewis anticipated. But their solution is not a cop-out. It may be simple in principle, but certainly not in application.

And perhaps it is not so simple in principle, either, for is not the inspiration of secondary belief a reflection of a solid primary one? You must have an idea yourself, your setting, and your audience when you set out to sub-create, for only an understanding of responses can create a real secondary place. Here comes the Primary world creeping back in! Others of you might be saying that now we have missed the point, for if what I just said is true then here we are back in our primary world, back with all the critics and confusions and, well, zombies. But is that not the point of sub-creation? To be in the world (recovery), and then set apart from it (escape), only to return to the world to affect it (consolation)? Indeed. And this is how the author, text, and reader are kept alive. Sub-creation, for everyone it involves, is just a way back home to the Primary world, but now with renewed minds, with revived thoughts, hopes, dreams, and calls to action. Who, after reading *The Lord of the Rings*, wants to stay sitting around glued to the couch? What LOTRO player does not feel his Primary world's relationships have been expanded because of

the time spent in community in its Secondary one? No, do not we readers and players and viewers, after taking a moment to soak in the truth and beauty of the art, desire to get up and be alive, seeking that truth and beauty in our own world? Do we not desire to rise up and find the swords that sang as they slew and live so that our tears can be the very wine of blessedness? Oh, yes. And this is what it is to be alive.

I will close with more poems: first, with the last stanza of the poem "On a Theme from Nicholas of Cusa" by C.S. Lewis, which describes what happens to the soul when it encounters truth, and then we will finish with a manifesto from Tolkien's "Mythopoeia". I am sure you will understand why.

"When the soul partakes of good
Or truth, which are her savoury food,
By some far subtler chemistry
It is not they that change, but she,
Who feels them enter with the state
Of conquerors her opened gate,
Or, mirror-like, digests their ray
By turning luminous as they."

~Lines 9-16 of "On a Theme from Nicholas of Cusa" by C. S. Lewis

"I will not treat your dusty path and flat,
denoting this and that by this and that,
your world immutable wherein no part
the little maker has with maker's art.
I bow not yet before the Iron Crown,
nor cast my own small golden sceptre down. !
"In Paradise perchance the eye may stray
from gazing upon everlasting Day
to see the day illumined, and renew
from mirrored truth the likeness of the True. !
"In Paradise they look no more awry;
and though they make anew, they make no lie.
Be sure they still will make, not being dead,
and poets shall have flames upon their head,
and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:
there each shall choose for ever from the All."

~From "Mythopoeia" by J. R. R. Tolkien

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