

Dénouement

As artists, we understand the necessity of both tension and resolution, satisfaction of expectation and surprise. No musical work is complete without the establishment of “home” (or perhaps in our modern age, the subversion of it) and then a subsequent departure from it. The twists and turns a work may take might carve a difficult path, requiring effort or strain on the part of the audience to fully, actively participate. The introduction of new techniques and formal methods and the denaturing of the familiar can all exact their toll on even the willing, but we see this as not merely a means to be passed through but as essential to the end itself. The culmination of a great work of music, whether by resolution, anti-resolution, or some other process, makes the whole narrative, the whole effort of the piece worth it. The journey can make the arrival at one’s destination all the sweeter.

So it is in our spiritual lives. We know full well the ending of our song, that we “set [our] hope fully on the grace to be given [us] when Jesus Christ is revealed,” (1 Pet. 1:13) and “we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2b). Our resolution will be in the full revelation of Christ Himself and the final and permanent rebirth of our own selves, purified and sinless. However, the certainty of a happy ending or a final victory often does little when our present circumstances seem to hedge all around, constricting and debilitating us, slowly draining away our strength and will to struggle on. The lie of despair can easily be the greatest enemy of those who know true hope in Christ. Even the admonition of St. James can feel lackluster: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” (1:2)

We are foolish twice over, though! As students of the Word we know this truth: that our struggles, whatever they may be, test and try and improve us. But as lovers of God’s beauty pervading throughout world, we know too that our trials of adversity are part of a larger story, a lovely and often daring narrative of our foibles and Christ’s unfailing love in correcting and

redirecting them. Following the Spirit in near-blind in darkness, we are able to be part of a more beautifully-woven work of art than any we could ourselves concoct, had we even an inkling of the knowledge required. We know the tension, the build-up, the work and effort that is required to reach the perfect resolution in a musical work, but we struggle to see the same effort and tension in our lives as worth their own resolutions.

A word occurs to me here, coined by our fellow-traveler in the Spirit, J.R.R. Tolkien: *eucatastrophe*, a *good* catastrophe or unraveling of a story at its conclusion. He writes:

“The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It 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.”ⁱ

We should be looking not only for deliverance from our trials and tribulations, but for *eucatastrophe*, deliverance that is as unexpected as it is inevitable. In this same way Christ was promised to come, described in a hundred ways by a God who had fulfilled all His promises despite covenants with man that were regularly broken. But when He did arrive, this was a complete surprise to nearly everyone who had been earnestly looking forward to Him. There was no better time or more thrilling venue for our salvation than what He chose. As the apostle Paul writes, “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6), and later that “creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21).

The very length and breadth and depth of our expectation and impatience is essential to the *dénouement* of our salvation.

All of this, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is a call to each of us to persevere, knowing full well the many resolutions God has granted us in the past, rescuing us from our own faults and the pain of others' mistakes. For those of us currently in the midst of doubt or despair from the struggles of this world, we can and should hope for deliverance in the present: not merely the ceasing of our pain but the "sudden turn" Tolkien writes of, as beautiful as it is unlooked-for, always keeping in mind that each of these *eucatastrophes* is merely a shadow of the one to come. We can and should be confident in God as our Author, composing for us a part eminently worth performing, though it may test us to our breaking point. Let us then, as the writer of Hebrews commends us, "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:16), remembering that the Lord's help is given in His time by His means, and though we may not see it at the time, it is always finely and fittingly crafted.

Your brother in Christ,

Christopher Ashbaugh

¹Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. George Allen & Unwin: London, 1983; p. 153.