

**In God, My Faithful God**

*Nicolaus Decius (1485–1546); tr. by Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)*

All glory be to Thee, Most High,  
To Thee all adoration!  
In grace and truth Thou drawest nigh  
To offer us salvation.  
Thou showest Thy good will to men,  
And peace shall reign on earth again;  
We praise Thy Name forever.

We praise, we worship Thee, we trust,  
And give Thee thanks forever,  
O Father, for Thy rule is just  
And wise, and changes never.  
Thy hand almighty o'er us reigns,  
Thou doest what Thy will ordains;  
'Tis well for us Thou rulest.

O Jesus Christ, our God and Lord,  
Son of the Heav'nly Father,  
O Thou, who hast our peace restored,  
The straying sheep dost gather,  
Thou Lamb of God, to Thee on high  
Out of the depths we sinners cry:  
Have mercy on us, Jesus!

O Holy Ghost, Thou precious gift,  
Thou Comforter, unfailing,  
From Satan's snares our souls uplift,  
And let Thy pow'r, availing,  
Avert our woes and calm our dread;  
For us the Savior's blood was shed,  
We trust in Thee to save us!

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### **The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 2: A Further Distinction**

*Kevin T. Bauder*

The purpose of these essays is to explore the Christian's use of fantastic literature. The discussion began with a definition of fantastic literature as belletristic writing that employs at least one of three elements: humanizing subhuman creatures, attributing marvelous powers to beings that people the imaginative world, or introducing creatures that do not exist in the real world. The discussion then distinguished fantastic literature from occult literature, pointing out that while the two categories overlap, they are not identical.

Before proceeding further, one other distinction is worth remarking. When we ask about the Christian's use of fantastic literature, we are really asking whether this literature is good or bad, and how good or bad it is. The problem is that literature can be good or bad in different ways.

When we call something *good* or *bad*, we are sometimes offering an evaluation of its moral uprightness. Works of literature convey meaning. Because they convey meaning, they articulate a moral vision.

The moral quality of literature does not depend simply on whether its characters do things that are acknowledged to be virtuous or vicious. More important is the fact that everyone who writes a work of fiction is to some extent creating an imaginative world—a universe. That universe may closely resemble the real universe or it may deviate greatly from it. A fictional universe, however, is never a mere copy of the real universe. If it were, it would be reporting and not fiction.

All universes without exception embody a moral order. The real universe certainly does, because it reflects the moral character of its Creator. The same is true of fictional universes. They always assume some moral reality above and behind the material reality. That moral order may match the moral order of the real universe or it may subvert it. It may even be inconsistent, affirming some aspects of moral reality while perverting others. To the extent that an author creates a universe that subverts or perverts genuine moral order, to that extent the work will be immoral. It will be bad in



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the sense that it is evil or corrupt. I shall have more to say about this kind of badness at a later point.

That is one thing that we can mean when we call a work of literature *good*. On the other hand, when we say that we are reading a “good book,” we do not usually mean that it is good in the moral sense. Often, we simply mean that it amuses us. More broadly, we mean that we have measured it according to the canons of its literary type or genre, and we have found that it measures up to those canons. In this sense, a book is good if it accomplishes whatever its kind of literature is supposed to do.

Every kind of literature has its own measurements for evaluation. Since fantasy is a form of belletristic fiction, it must be judged by the standards that apply to works of fictional literature. Broadly, fictional writing can be evaluated according to characterization, plot, point of view, setting, tone, theme, and style. Fantastic writing does not so much add new elements as it places all the elements in a different kind of universe, creating unique challenges for authorial consistency. The value of the story as a work of literature will depend upon how skilled the author is in manipulating all these elements.

Since I do not propose to write an essay on literary criticism, I will expand upon just one element in a work of fiction: characterization. A critic will ask certain questions about the characters. Are they believable? Does a reader care what happens to them? Are the major characters flat and monochrome or are they complex and colorful? Do they remain static or do they develop throughout the work? No fiction with poorly drawn characters can be a great work of literature.

The same is true of the other elements. Knowing the right questions to ask can help a reader to evaluate every element, recognizing that a serious failure in any area will injure the overall work. If a story has marvelous characters but a weak plot, it will turn out to be a bad work. The same is true if it adopts an inappropriate tone, or if the author is a poor stylist. Of course, every writer is stronger in some of these areas and weaker in others, but to produce truly good works of fiction, authors must master them all.

In sum, when we call a story *good*, we might mean either of two things. One is that the work is morally upright and decent. The other is that the story is competently written. The two kinds of goodness do not always go together. Much literature is competently written but morally flawed. The reverse is also true, especially among Christian authors: the literature is so virtuous as almost to constitute a moral tract, but it is badly written. Of course, literature that is both morally corrupt and badly written also gets published. The best of all possible combinations, however, is to read literature that is both morally and artistically excellent.

Much of the controversy with Christians who object to fantastic literature involves the moral element. They believe that at least some forms of fantasy

are intrinsically immoral, so they insist that Christians must not read it. As I have made clear, I intend to address this question. Before even opening that discussion, I concede that some fantasy is actually written so as to lack virtue and to promote vice. When examining works of fantasy, one of the questions that I shall ask is whether this work is moral in the ethical sense of the term.

Nevertheless, the question of literary excellence is also important. In view of that fact, I also intend to evaluate the literary worth of particular examples of fantastic literature. I do not believe that Christians should feel obligated to sacrifice good writing in the interest of good morals.

We have now introduced another important distinction, namely, the distinction between moral and literary excellence. We are almost ready to proceed with our discussion. Before we do, however, I want to take the time to specify what I do *not* intend to accomplish. That will form the subject matter of the next essay.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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