

# Prolegomenon to the Sub-Creative Genius of Tolkien and His Contemporaries

## 1.1 Tolkien and the Edwardian Legacy

The opening stanza of T. S. Eliot's "Choruses from the Rock" (above), originated in a 1934 pageant called *The Rock*, which was commissioned in order to raise funds for building churches in the new suburbs in the diocese of north London between the wars. The building projects were aimed at creating sacred spaces in the expanding 'waste lands,' where Eliot perceives London as a 'time kept city' of commerce and shipping trade: hallmarks of early-mid-twentieth-century secularism. In this problem of secularized loss of transcendent meaning, Frank Sawyer notes that Eliot uses words where composers of the day might have used musical notation, in that "all his poems play with intellectually discordant thoughts, discordant sounds, and unexpected juxtapositions, often depending on word-plays and half-hidden meanings or pointers."<sup>1</sup>

It is these themes of discordance amidst order and harmony that contemporaries of Eliot, such as Tolkien and Britten, used in order to juxtapose beauty and ugliness, unity and difference, perfection in God and a lapse from that transcendent ideal. Eliot was writing at the same time that Tolkien was redrafting elements of his own cosmo-genesis and, like Tolkien, begins the above work with a cosmogonic drama, Neoplatonic in its stylizing of whirling stars in planetary motions, producing cycles of 'awareness' from eternity to finitude. There is here an ideal in God's unity and simplicity, but much is lost as temporality proceeds from the cosmic drama into reality and experience.

1. Sawyer, "The Rock," 1.

We know that Tolkien was aware of, and read Eliot, and that Britten put Eliot's words to music, in particular, those with a religious theme.<sup>2</sup> This cultural interplay, therefore, alongside his well-documented literary interchange with his friends in the TCBS and the Inklings, sets Tolkien amongst an intellectual and cultural *milieu*, which is striving to bring meaning, enchantment, and wonder out of the mythology and biblical imagery of the English literary canon on the one hand, and the horror and disillusion caused by the Great War on the other.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that Eliot was a direct influence on Tolkien, but I make the point that they had a similar literary intention, as presented to an English-speaking audience.<sup>4</sup> In the foreword to *The Book of Lost Tales*, Christopher Tolkien explains that his father's writings originated in 1916–17, during convalescence from his sickness and combat experiences during the Battle of the Somme, and left incomplete several years later.<sup>5</sup> During this hiatus, he turned to composing the long poems of *The Tale of Tinúviel* and *The Children of Hurin* in alliterative verse. However, over many revisions and compilations, they existed and were still being edited in early versions of *The Silmarillion* in 1937. It was in this decade that Eliot wrote and first performed *The Rock* (1934). Tom Shippey includes Tolkien as one of a number of “traumatised authors” writing fantasy, but voicing in that fantasy “the most pressing and immediate relevant issues of the whole monstrous twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup> One might ask why can't Tolkien's Middle-earth writings be simply what they are—fantasy—a story of journey and quest, of brotherhood and friendships forged in the face of adversity? The answer is quite straight forward: for the author, written into that fantasy are things which are, at an altogether different level, very real. Tolkien utilizes a variety of resources with which he constructs a world of imagination, enchantment, and reality. This reality points to what things are in their relation to God: being and gift. Things are what they are/are not (ontologically and meontologically) precisely because something has willed that they be so, and are ordered hierarchically in a great chain of being.

In his 1992 Encyclical Letter *Fides Et Ratio*, Pope (now Saint) John Paul II recognized that:

2. Evans, *Music of Benjamin Britten*, 411–14. It wasn't until 1971, however, that Britten composed and performed the setting for Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, and 1975, two years after Tolkien's death, that he composed the setting for *The Death of Narcissus*.

3. The Tea Club, Barovian Society was a literary club, comprising Tolkien and several friends from King Edward's School in Birmingham. The Inklings were a similarly disposed group of Oxford scholars.

4. Carpenter, *Letters*, 350, 353.

5. Tolkien, *Book of Lost Tales 1*, 8.

6. Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, xix.

Men and women have at their disposal an array of resources for generating greater knowledge of truth so that their lives may be ever more human. Among those is *philosophy*, which is directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and sketching an answer to it.<sup>7</sup>

This investigation is partly in response to that quest towards meaning in terms of life's createdness and giftedness, as it may be discerned from the complex linguistic strands of Tolkien's entire *corpus*. It is also in part to St John Paul II's appeal to

*philosophers* and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical enquiry.<sup>8</sup>

The extent to which Tolkien was working towards that end in his own time will be explored here. As a Catholic, Tolkien believed in the *Fidei Depositum*—a body of faith, based on right reason and revelation, but based also upon the writings of Christian scholars who utilized in a variety of ways the philosophy of Plato. Tolkien's belief in an objective truth about life and the world rises out of his own faith and life-experience, and St John Paul II sums up what I am postulating concerning Tolkien's entire project: "Only within this horizon of truth will people understand their freedom in its fullness and their call to know and love God as the supreme realization of their true self."<sup>9</sup> The claim of human freedom, constituted as 'being and gift,' is supported throughout this investigation in both their physical and metaphysical aspects.

Tolkien's genuine ambition was to create a 'mythology for England' using ancient literary sources, devices and idioms.<sup>10</sup> Consistent with classical and Neoplatonic method, Tolkien introduced his mythological world through the agency of music—divine music, to create and evolve a landscape, and people it with a plenitude of (apparently) substantially good creatures. He was not alone in this project. In a different and yet equally very English manner, his later contemporary Benjamin Britten wrote: "One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English

7. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, para 3.

8. *Ibid.*, para 106.

9. *Ibid.*, para 107.

10 Carpenter, *Letters*, 144–45.

language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell.<sup>11</sup>

For Britten, music had both a pithy and immediate quality, but conversely conveyed eternal ideas where words simply fail, and for him this was epitomized by a lifetime's struggle with the Christian faith and pacifism, amidst his own turbulent relationships. In a letter to Henry Boys, he expressed this inner and aesthetic struggle:

It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness & of pain: of strength & freedom. The beauty of disappointment & never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony. [. . .] Perhaps if I could understand some of the Indian philosophies I might approach it a little. At the moment I can do no more than bask in its heavenly light—& it is worth having lived to do that.<sup>12</sup>

In his 1937 work *The Company of Heaven*, he weaves into the musical text words from Gerard Manley Hopkins about the struggle between Lucifer and the 'sons of God' whereby he (Lucifer), instead of shouting for joy, crafted his own song in self-praise and in opposition to the mind and purposes of God. The Britten text reads:

When all the sons of God shouted for joy, Lucifer would not take part, but sang his own song. This song of Lucifer's was a dwelling on its own beauty, an instressing of his own inscape, and like a performance on the organ and instrument of his own being; it was a sounding, as they say, of his own trumpet and a hymn in his own praise. Moreove [sic] it became an incantation, others were drawn in; it became a concert of voices, a concerting of selfpraise, an enchantment, a magic, by which they were dizzied, dazzled, and bewitched. They would not listen to the note which summoned each to his own place and disturbed them here and there in the liturgy of the sacrifice; they gathered rather closer and closer home under Lucifer's lead and drowned it, raising a countermusic and countertemple and altar, a counterpoint of dissonance and not of harmony.<sup>13</sup>

It is this dissonance, projecting itself into harmonic structures that attempt to express the inner struggles of writers and composers of the day; it is also the case within Tolkien's co-creation, expressing his own self-understanding

11. Brett, *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, 149.

12. Matthews, *Britten*, 22.

13. Britten, *Company of Heaven*, 6.

and inner struggles with life, and his Catholic Neoplatonic understanding of the cosmos. Britten, a pacifist, writing amidst the growing strength of Nazi Germany, was crafting a pre-existent account of “Chaos” (section I of the work above); whilst in the same year Tolkien published *The Hobbit*, commenced work on *LOTR*, and sent a complete draft of *The Silmarillion* to his publisher for consideration.<sup>14</sup> If Shippey is correct in his assertion above, then this fruitful period of literary and musical enterprise presented to English audiences a foil whereby they may hear in music and read in their native tongue the Neoplatonic enterprise of late Antiquity and the early medieval period. Creation and fall, restoration and return, are features of pre-modern philosophies, presented in literary genres bearing the context of their own day. Tolkien’s romantic or anti-modern outlook seeks a re-enchantment which reflects the struggles of early twentieth-century Europe, but at the same time incorporates a range of philosophical themes consonant within a broad Neoplatonic account of life as ‘being and gift’:

[When an author creates a believable world] what really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.<sup>15</sup>

The conclusions of my study rest, therefore, upon the following postulates: First, that Tolkien was a writer of both fantasy *and* philosophy, utilizing a wide array of Christian and pre-Christian mythology and philosophy, and melding them into a complex whole: a *multiplex theoria*. Indeed, he was a writer who incorporated into his work a sophisticated and, at times, very original metaphysics of being. Secondly, that Tolkien utilized a broad Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation: life as ‘being and gift’ in Tolkien’s co-creation subsists only insofar as it participates in something prior to itself, namely God. Thirdly, that as a skilled storyteller and gifted medievalist, Tolkien crafted into his own mythology a variety of Neoplatonic strands, and did not rely on a single source. His works have a striking dependency upon different scholars within this tradition, at different points in his literary life. Fourthly, that ‘human being’ containing a created free moral agency, displays a freedom of the will which originates in its source, and in its most mysterious expression demonstrates

14. Carpenter, *Biography*, 265; Tolkien, *Book of Lost Tales* 1, 8.

15. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 37.

a freedom from material form, independent of the narrow categories of material genus. This freedom is shared amongst all created beings in Tolkien's *legendarium*, but is never independent of the providence of God, even where there is a turn towards evil and corruption.

There is an over-arching *thema* to this investigation, in that Tolkien was never free from his lifelong belief and practice as an English Catholic, committed as he was to promoting Catholic intellectual and theological truths through his works. There is no strident polemic, such as we see in the works of his colleague and close friend C. S. Lewis, and he doubtless did not set out to systematise one: but one exists nevertheless.

## 1.2 The Current Status of Tolkien Studies

The significant and original contribution to Tolkien studies offered here is due largely to a dearth of scholarly material on the themes upon which I have chosen to focus. In particular, use of previously unpublished material in the Bodleian Library's Special Collection Department at the University of Oxford has opened up opportunities for original and incisive interpretations of key aspects of Tolkien's *corpus*.

Criticism and analysis in Tolkien's work is largely literary and cultural, and most of that from the perspective of 'Tolkien the medievalist.' Notable commentators along these lines are Chance, Chism, Le Guin, Luthi, Pearce, Rateliff, Shippey, and Gray, though the latter two write biography in a different manner than does Humphrey Carpenter—Tolkien's official biographer. Tolkien has been read as both modernist and postmodernist. Alison Milbank acknowledges Tolkien's modernist endeavor as a parallel to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and asserts that, "Modernist writing reaches back to assert the influence of earlier culture on the present through the 'mythic method,' while simultaneously stressing the gap between modernity and the past through ironic juxtaposition."<sup>16</sup> Patrick Curry cites Tolkien as restoring to our cultural heritage a re-enchantment, realization, and 'myth-as-truth' perspective about our own real-world possibilities. Curry attempts to decry the aesthetic and environmental expressions of modernism, and posits Tolkien's writings as a postmodernist response to the demystifying 'absolutism' of its own self-confidence.<sup>17</sup> Curry and Luling attempt to address Tolkien's mythology in terms of ecological and anthropological responses to issues raised by modernism, as does Alfred Siewers—linking Tolkien's ecological writings to those of John Scottus Eriugena. Recent contributions from Alison

16. Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien*, ix.

17. Curry, "Tolkien and His Critics," 97–99.

Milbank, Houghton, Eden, and Flieger, take Tolkien's works as a reference for serious reflection on important philosophical themes; whereas Skögemann and O'Neil attempt a Jungian interpretation of his works. Themes that recur throughout these studies relate to his own ideas of creation and fall (in *The Silmarillion*), and the resulting growth of moral evil challenging the emergent races of Middle-earth. Tolkien's project defies simplistic interpretation and categorisation.<sup>18</sup> There have been particular strident efforts by some to advance the distinctively Catholic nature of the work, and Alton, Caldecott, and Coulombe champion this cause with some intellectual vigor. Notwithstanding the great acclaim that his works have received since the recent resurgence of interest, there are many dissenters still.<sup>19</sup>

Craig Bernthal's recent publication seeks to extrapolate a sacramental understanding in Tolkien's works, based upon the use of 'signs' in John's Gospel, and places Tolkien firmly amongst his own Catholic contemporaries. Jonathan Macintosh's 2009 doctoral thesis and book—"The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and The Metaphysics of Faërie"—has provided several leads into the use of Aquinas' metaphysics in Tolkien's philosophy of creation, in particular his description of the 'mind-music-vision-reality' of Arda. This is supported by an influential chapter on "Music in Middle-earth," in which he proposes that a corrective is necessary when considering Tolkien's created nature, inspired as it is by Neoplatonism. Though largely undeveloped (in terms of my own investigation), it shows a clear understanding of the alleged patristic and medieval influences on Tolkien's method, in particular Aquinas' analysis of created being in terms of its distinction from the One and divine extravagance in created being.

Verlyn Flieger (1983), Bradford Eden (2003), and Kathleen Dubbs describe Tolkien's creation myth in terms of a diminution of being, largely in line with a Neoplatonic understanding of idealism: the further that things are distanced from their source, then the less that they are.

18. Tolkien corrects his publisher (again): "do not let (Rayner) suspect 'Allegory.' There is a 'moral,' I suppose, in any tale worth telling. But that is not the same thing. Even the struggle between darkness and light is [. . .] one example of its pattern [. . .] but not The Pattern; Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth [. . .] the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory" (Carpenter, *Letters*, 120–21). However, three years later, Tolkien concedes that despite his dislike of direct allegory, "any attempt to purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language, anyway all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality and the Machine" (Carpenter, *Letters*, 145).

19. Curry, *Tolkien and His Critics*, 88–89, refers to criticisms which label Tolkien as sexist, racist, escapist, infantile, Marxist, nostalgic, quietist, and fascist. For a comprehensive panorama of the critical and academic reception of Tolkien's works, in both the UK and USA, see Chance, *Mythology of Power*, 18–19.

### 1.3 Influences and Inspiration

The primary sources of this investigation prioritize Tolkien's own published works. In addition, his posthumously published *Letters* add significantly to his own project, and provide an essential historical collection of his own commentary on how one might interpret his works. His son, Christopher Tolkien, has done much to advance Tolkien studies, by his meticulous *Introductions* and careful reconstructions of posthumously published works, as recently as June 2018. These and the unpublished manuscripts now residing in the Special Collections Department of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, shed much light on the gaps hitherto left by Tolkien's death in 1973.<sup>20</sup> Secondary sources which constitute scholarly commentaries on Tolkien's works are thin on the ground, and part of the originality of this book is its extensive reliance on primary texts. There is no acknowledgment in Tolkien's own works of dependency upon key scholars, and I have undertaken extensive forensic investigations in several obscure Tolkien publications, in order to tease out support for my thesis.

The sources of, and influences on, Tolkien's works are complex, and the subject of much debate and speculation. Many biographers and commentators (such as Carpenter, Shippey and Garth) rightly highlight his interest in north European legend and lore, his experiences in the First World War, his love of the countryside, and his fear and loathing of industrialization and modernism. In addition to these insightful observations, it is hard to deny that Tolkien's primary philosophical influences demonstrate a largely Augustinian outlook, whilst simultaneously drawing from other theological strands from the late patristic to the early medieval period. Given also Tolkien's professional career at Oxford, first as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon (1925 to 1945) and later Merton Professor of Language and Literature (1945 to 1959), a broad Christian Neoplatonism can never be underestimated, even if it was nowhere clearly stated or supported in his published works. That Tolkien could be termed a 'medievalist' is a hypothesis in which significant Tolkien literary studies take their stand. Given his professional penchant for Early and Middle English (and Welsh), and his antipathy towards the cultural trauma of the Norman invasion, this is a bold but well-founded assumption. Tolkien, as one would expect of a

20. Christopher Tolkien has published twenty one books posthumously, which elucidate his earlier notes and draft works. In addition, they contain various collections of unique transcripts which are appropriate to this thesis. John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, 71–88; 214–23, gives a detailed 'life setting' of the earliest of his unpublished works, clearly relating them to his experiences in the First World War, and early interest in ancient European languages. See also Carpenter, *Biography*, 102–6.

Classicist, already had a mastery of Greek and Latin before he was awarded his (minor) Exhibition to study at Oxford. What is certain, is that he soon became bored with Classics, and spent far too much time discovering Germanic languages, largely inspired by his teacher and Professor of Comparative Philology, Joe Wright.<sup>21</sup> In his unpublished *Notes on the Origins of the English Nation*, he remarks that the “neglectedness” of our particular linguistic history is the direct “confusion of practically all writers on Northern European history.”<sup>22</sup> He adds a pejorative remark that this linguistic turn was ‘the first French intrusion into English as an end to 850 years of ‘the speakers of English.’” However, he tempers this comment by adding that “the disappearance and corruption of English literature was not only due to the Norman Conquest, but had really begun, before their arrival, under the Danish Kings.”<sup>23</sup> Accompanying the Northern European intrusion into the English language of the early medieval period, were philosophical themes and a manner of looking at life—a *temper*—based on these invading peoples’ indigenous ideas of life’s origin and destiny.

Arising out of this period we encounter Boethius, whose works enfolded the core subjects of the *Quadrivium*, and his *Consolations of Philosophy* became almost a universally read text for scholars of late antiquity, developing the earlier philosophical ideas of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. Tolkien scholars such as Jane Chance and Tom Shippey postulate a dependency on Boethius for such themes as chance, free-will, and the challenge of mutability and evil.<sup>24</sup> Shippey notes that in Old English, ‘doomsday’ has no sense of ‘luck’ or ‘chance’ about it, but more of ‘fate’—the idea of a power sitting above mortals and ruling their lives by its sentence or by its speech alone.<sup>25</sup> In the dialogue with Lady Philosophy, Boethius is consoled with the hard truth of Fortune’s fickle nature:

It is the sea’s right at one moment to smile indulgently with glassy waters, and at another to bristle with storms and breakers. [. . .] This power that I wield comes naturally to me; this is my perennial sport. I turn my wheel on its whirling course, and take delight in switching the base to the summit, and the summit to the base. So mount upward, if you will, but on condition

21. Carpenter, *Biography*, 62–64.

22. *Bodleian SC-MSS A21/1*, 68–79.

23. *Ibid.*, 76

24. Shippey, *Author of the Century*, 129–31.

25. Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 288.

that you do not regard yourself ill-treated if you plummet down  
when my humour demands and takes its course.<sup>26</sup>

Shippey's argument here is unduly pessimistic: God orders the fates of all and, whilst He may be transcendent in order to do so, this higher power still pervades. I shall demonstrate, however, that Tolkien adopted a far less deterministic approach to life and being in relation to God's foreknowledge of temporal events, and that Shippey's reading has more coherence with the Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian worldview. Tolkien's use of Latin sources (late antique and early medieval) in the philosophy of his mythology, includes Boethius' *Consolations*. From here, Jane Chance postulates that Tolkien may have borrowed concepts such as the reconciliation of providence, fate, and free will that help to explain the often-antithetical statements about chance and fate. Here she concedes that Tolkien was strongly influenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>27</sup> To what extent Tolkien could be said to be a Neoplatonist, in light of the works of Augustine and his successors, will be the question at the heart of this investigation.

C. S. Lewis once commented that no-one ever influenced Tolkien: "you might as well try to influence a Bandersnatch."<sup>28</sup> Whilst this may entertain a degree of apocryphal truth, Tolkien's works are saturated with external influences, though he was reluctant to name many of them. William Gray postulates that, whilst the greatest modern influence upon Tolkien was William Morris, the greatest single influence was "the author of Beowulf."<sup>29</sup> Tolkien's celebrated essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and Their Critics," being the text of his now-famous 1936 Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy, demonstrates the literary link between the emerging Christianization of northern Europe and Tolkien's own project: the weaving of ancient themes into a narrative which expresses both the language and 'temper' of an earlier age, and can be seen in his 'tower allegory.'<sup>30</sup> The use of ancient materials to build something contemporary and useful—"to see the sea"—may at first seem illogical, but on later inspection and reflection, may indeed prove a worthy and coherent project. I shall demonstrate that this

26. Boethius, *Consolations*, 2.2.8–10.

27. Chance, *Mythology of Power*, 16–17. She acknowledges Tolkien as a "master as-simulator" of sources, but only offers a "may have borrowed" theory to what follows in her discussion. Chance relies instead on the evidence of Kathleen Dubs in "Providence, Fate and Chance," 133–42.

28. C. S. Lewis, in a letter to Charles Moorman 15 May 1959, quoted by Bratman, "Gifted Amateurs," 305. Lewis saw literature as a web of mutual influence, much more so than Tolkien, who instead preferred to "plough his own furrow."

29. Gray, *Fantasy*, 64; and Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 389.

30. Tolkien, *Monsters*, 7–9.

is how Tolkien saw the intention and method of the author of *Beowulf*, and gives us a clue to his own project. Flieger summarized the importance of this tower allegory as “the desire to seek something without knowing what it is.”<sup>31</sup> Tolkien’s philological quest begins with ancient words, developed and honed into stories, influenced by their ancient usage. But here we must differentiate between ‘source’ and ‘influence’: “a source gives us something to write about; an influence prompts us to write in a certain way.”<sup>32</sup> Tolkien supports this hypothesis, wherein he writes:

what is I think a primary ‘fact’ about my work, that it is all a piece, and fundamentally linguistic in inspiration. [. . .] The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows.<sup>33</sup>

Tolkien, like others of his generation, took copies of Morris with him into the trenches in the June of 1916, but to infer any direct influence from this is highly speculative.<sup>34</sup> In winning the Skeat Prize at Oxford for English in the same year, Tolkien purchased several Morris volumes, including Morris’ translation of the *Volsungasaga* and prose-and-verse romance, *The House of the Wolfings*.<sup>35</sup> As a saga, *LOTR* resembles ancient works much cherished in Tolkien’s early studies. Chance notes that the correlation between the *LOTR* trilogy and both the Norse-Icelandic *Eddas* and the Finnish epic of the *Kalevala*, although its loosely episodic technique of branching journey-quests most approximates *entrelacements*, displays a late medieval romance characteristic.<sup>36</sup> However, it was earlier, in 1914, that he discovered words from an ancient Anglo-Saxon Christian poem, *Crist*: “*Eala Earendel engla beorhast / ofer middengeard monnum sende*.”<sup>37</sup> In another posthumously published work, he claimed that:

when I came across that citation [. . .] I felt a curious thrill, as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There

31. Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 50, 14–16.

32. C. S. Lewis, *Authorised Version*, 133–34.

33. Carpenter, *Letters*, 219.

34. Garth, *Great War*, 296.

35. Carpenter, *Biography*, 77. For sources and influences see also Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 388–98; Gray, *Fantasy*, 64–69.

36. Chance, *Mythology of Power*, 15–16.

37. “Hail! Earendel brightest of angels / above the Middle-earth sent unto men.”

was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English.<sup>38</sup>

Later in 1914, he wrote the poem “The Voyage of Earendel the Evening Star,” which opens with the line: “Earendel sprang up from the ocean’s cup / in the gloom of the mid rim.” In the Latin antiphons for Vespers for the last days of Advent, we read *O Oriens*: “O Rising Sun, splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice: O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”<sup>39</sup> Set in a Christian context, this Antiphon clearly refers to Christ; in a pre-Christian context it appeals to a forerunner of Christ, to a Saviour whose nature was as yet unknown.<sup>40</sup> Tolkien later wrote this poem as the “launching of his ship” into mythology, and was to appear in the earliest of his written *legendarium*, *The Fall of Gondolin*. Mindful of his desire to exclude any explicit Christian material he adds, “the use of Earendel in [Anglo-Saxon] Christian symbolism as the herald of the rise of the true Sun in Christ is completely alien to my use.”<sup>41</sup> Throughout his works, Tolkien is keen to avoid obvious religious rituals, prayers, and the like. This investigation demonstrates that his entire *legendarium* is, however, imbued with Catholic Christian themes, and that he does not rely on a single source only for inspiration. He melds the methodologies of scholar and author by thinking metaphorically in his published essays, and experimenting theoretically in his fiction, allowing him to scrutinize the uses and powers of both. *LOTR*, at one level, is a renunciation of mythology, and the willed return to history:

Middle-earth unfolds, grows more intricate, more peopled,  
more culturally diverse, more deep as we wander through it,  
but it blooms forth only in the shadow of its own immanent  
destruction.<sup>42</sup>

It is no accident that the writing of this ‘renunciatory’ narrative occupies dark night after dark night, during a time when Germany was mobilizing and recasting heroic Germanic ideals to articulate and impose its own terrifying new world. Tolkien’s writing works to recover and imaginatively reanimate past traditions, lost words, gap-ridden stories: in writing, he sought to present them in their true light.<sup>43</sup> Tolkien negotiates the ethical dilemma

38. Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 236; and Carpenter, *Biography*, 71–72.

39. *The Divine Office*, 153.

40. Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 277–81.

41. Carpenter, *Letters*, 387.

42. Chism, “Middle-earth,” 64.

43. Carpenter, *Letters*, 56, 219; Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 26–31, notes that

that Wagner's devotees must still negotiate: how can one separate enjoyment of the complex artistic *diagetic* world from the political and cultural uses to which its power can be put? Can the work of art remain innocent in itself, though cursed in its usage? Chism offers a resounding 'No!' on Tolkien's behalf.<sup>44</sup> Given how highly Tolkien regarded fantasy and sub-creation, as both an art form and foil for literary realism, it is small wonder that he offers a recasting of the Wagnerian tradition, in light of his own understanding of virtue and morality, along clearly drawn and traditional Christian lines.<sup>45</sup> Tolkien's own sub-creation must transcend the dull interpretation of allegory (at least in his own eyes), and offer a mythology which, whilst never neutral in its 'applicability,' focused upon the good to which all ends seek. Chance introduces Tolkien's project, as a serious contribution to the catastrophe that had torn apart Europe in the first half of the twentieth century:

*The Lord of the Rings* is generally recognized today as a powerful work of creative imagination, whose levels of understanding are dependent on the synthesis and assimilation of medieval and modern materials.<sup>46</sup>

Against the backdrop of the modern age, with growing industrialization, threat of nuclear holocaust, and totalitarianism, Tolkien wrote his narrative where the individual was becoming dispossessed and powerless against fate and the universal horror of evil, whether in Auschwitz, South Africa, or Eastern Europe. If there is evil in this world, whatever its source (and/or ontology), then at least for Tolkien, an attempt at a solution was pressing. For the Christian, it may appear a strange project to recast a broadly Augustinian solution into such a vast body of work. However, as I shall demonstrate, Augustine is neither the totality of Tolkien's influence and source, but one, nevertheless, whose shadow is cast over this work.

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the 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages, and not the reverse. Shippey describes how Tolkien uses the process of 'calqueing' in order to achieve his literary realism, and give places and people a historical credibility (115–16). It is in this philological sense that he can say that Middle-earth is 'our world' (Carpenter, *Letters*, 220).

44. Chism, "Middle-earth," 78.

45. Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth*, 81, argues that to attempt a justification of Tolkien's Middle earth in a literal sense as 'Realism' is being too naive, and has no sensible claim in scholarship. His worldview was to create nouns and places out of adjectives which themselves have sources in the Norse *Elder Edda*. Examples are Gandalf, Beorn, Gollum, and the dwarves in *The Hobbit*.

46. Chance, *Mythology of Power*, 1.

#### 1.4 Structure of the Book

The opening section (chapter 2) focuses on key themes of how Tolkien may have used and adapted a variety of Neoplatonist models of creation in his own sub-creation. The strands are rich and varied and, whilst at times I have engaged in speculative investigation, I have demonstrated that Tolkien owes his methodology to a sophisticated melding of these strands in his own works, which we read in the opening section of *The Silmarillion*, and its various stages of development published by his son, Christopher. This section maps the trajectory of Platonic and Neoplatonic idealism from Plotinus, through Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, to Aquinas' highly developed philosophy of 'createdness' as gift. Each in their own way will be shown to contribute to the co-creative project of Tolkien, and sets the scene for the main emphasis of this section: that creation is not a necessary emanation from an impersonal transcendent deity, but the free and unmerited gift of a gratuitous God, who shares the process of co-creation with his creatures, both incorporeal and (Middle) earthly.

There has been a marked tendency in recent Tolkien literature to read his cosmo-genesis and the 'Music of the Ainur' in terms of the emanationist logic of Neoplatonic philosophy: the later stages of the creation process, and the development of Middle-earth are seen as metaphysically inferior to, and a *lapsus*—a tragic falling away—from the supposedly more authentic divine and pure reality presented by the primeval music. I hypothesize, however, that whilst this may be one reading of Tolkien's cosmo-genesis, he intended a more orthodox reading of the text in light of what I propose is his Thomistic understanding of metaphysics and aesthetics of beauty and being. Through the combined metaphors of music and vision of the Ainur, Tolkien provides a worldview that is not so much a tragic lapse from either a Plotinian emanationist schema, nor an Augustinian ideal Eden-like state, but one which is consistent with what we shall see to be his Thomistic existential realism. The world's gift in creation is 'euchatastrophically' surpassed when it is blessed/hallowed by the Creator, and Tolkien can be seen to have successfully synthesized the *musica universalis* tradition within a Thomistic metaphysics of creation, influenced as he was by contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Maritain and David Jones.

Chapter 3 constitutes a philosophical and linguistic Case Study, based around Tolkien's favorite story, and early text—*The Tale of Tinúviel*. In this, I argue that, given the particular focus of the broader investigation, Tolkien's philosophy of life as 'being and gift' draws on later Neoplatonic writers such as Boethius from the sixth century, but is equally rooted in the Old- and Middle-English traditions of *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, *The Wanderer*, and

*The Seafarer*. This investigation therefore draws attention to Tolkien's use of Christian Neoplatonism constituted as multi-layered, and that he draws from a number of sources in promoting his philosophy of life. In the first instance, I have demonstrated that Tolkien's philosophy of being in *The Tale of Tinúviel* has its origins in his own personal life and marriage to Edith, and yet it borrows narrative sources from Tolkien's store of European mythology and Anglo-Saxon myth—especially *Beowulf*. Secondly, I present using Neoplatonist texts the assertion that rational beings in Tolkien's early *legendarium* are both psychologically and morally free, despite the choices of others which act as incidental 'chance' events. This is demonstrated by a comparison between Boethius' (Latin) and Alfred's (Anglo-Saxon) versions of the *Consolations*, given that Tolkien adapted a broad Augustinian and Boethian view, modified by other influences in the tradition. Thirdly, the theme of 'doom,' which has an Anglo-Saxon provenance, will be seen to have a narrower meaning than common contemporary usage, and supports an earlier (Latin) rendering of providence and fate. This section concludes with an assertion that death, when spoken of as 'doom,' is both proper to a thing's (mortal) nature, but is also subject to freedom in certain cases.

Chapter 4 introduces the recent scholarship of Alfred K. Siewers, and offers an intriguing and fresh approach to Tolkien's sub-creative vista, along the lines of those we read in Irish and Welsh legend, and from the perspective of John Scottus Eriugena.<sup>47</sup> I have demonstrated that Siewers' works present both a mystical and Otherworld Neoplatonist approach to Tolkien's metaphysics, one that is both distinct from the Graeco-Latin profile of Plato and his legacy, and also takes into full account the over-layering of this textual tradition. I further hypothesize that, whilst there can be no certain dependency theory; Tolkien also derived much of his philosophical framework of life—especially the life and destiny of humanity—from Eriugena. Siewers makes significant and bold claims that as a medievalist, Tolkien draws on the anthropology and eco-philosophy of Eriugena, in order to stretch beyond his Augustinian Catholicism, combining it also with a Celtic mysticism.<sup>48</sup> It is no surprise that Eriugena's works and popularity in the Carolingian court correlate to the commonly held dating of *Beowulf* in the mid-late ninth century AD. Eriugena's links to both Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, and influences from Aristotle's *Ten Categories*, point towards that subtle craft of Tolkien's mythological invention, given his reticence to systematize Christian allegory into his own fantasy genre. Human freedom is itself multi-layered,

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48. Siewers, "Tolkien's Cosmic-Christian Ecology," 140.

and involves a 'freedom from form' in corporeality and finitude, and this is seen to be evident in *The Tale of Tinúviel*, in episodes concerning shape-shifting. An examination of Eriugena's anthropology in his *Periphyseon*, as an extension to a broad Augustinian-Boethian Neoplatonism, and Eriugena's earlier presentation of the issue in his *Treatise on Divine Predestination* demonstrates that in this respect, Eriugena supports earlier forms of the tradition, in that humanity is free from the hard determinism and fatalism common to their European pagan forebears. The key concept of participation is restated, but in a more mystical and less defined manner than the later developments of Aquinas. As such, Tolkien's speculative reading of Eriugena opens the door to viewing human destiny and its *reditus* more in the mode of a *theosis*, than a realized bodily resurrection.

The destiny of Beren and Lúthien displays a striking freedom of the mind and will, accompanied by a resultant transformation of form: from life to death (Beren) and from elf to mortal woman (Lúthien). In either respect, their *Reditus* as formulated in an Eriuganean Neoplatonic mysticism is simply a return to 'self,' in terms of unfallen human nature, within the enfoldments of God—without sexual differentiation, without even a body. This cross-over of interdisciplinary study of Tolkien's works demonstrates the multi-layered appeal of his mythology. Seen on a broad canvas, the fantasy becomes the real.

Chapter 5 considers a significant theme in the Middle-earth writings: the problem of evil and suffering. Given that Tolkien's sub-creation reflects the broad Augustinian outlook on creation, that God only creates substantially good creatures and that matter is essentially good, there is the challenge of the mutability towards evil. Amongst the Ainur there is Melkor, who in his immanent form becomes Morgoth, and chooses to become corporeal like one of the Valar.<sup>49</sup> Amongst the Maiar is the protagonist Sauron, enemy of the free peoples of Middle-earth;<sup>50</sup> and Melkor's archaean spider, Ungoliant.<sup>51</sup> I have shown that Tolkien adopts an equally

49. The Valar were the fourteen powerful spirits of the race of the Ainur who entered Arda after its creation to give order to the world and combat the evils of Melkor. They dwelt originally on the Isle of Almaren, but after its destruction, long before the Awakening of the elves, they moved to Aman and founded Valinor.

50. Each of the Maiar was associated with one or more particular Vala, and were of similar stock, though less powerful. For example, Ossë and Uinen, as spirits of the sea, belonged to Ulmo, while Curumo, who came to be known in Middle-earth as Saruman, belonged to Aulë the Smith. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 33–35.

51. Ungoliant's origins are shrouded in mystery. It is thought that she may have been one of the Maiar, or a lesser spirit, whom Melkor corrupted long ago, but she is not listed among the Ainur. It is also said that she came from the darkness above the skies of Arda, leading some to believe that she may be an incarnation of darkness or emptiness itself.

broad Christian Neoplatonist approach to evil, in particular one reflecting Augustine's aesthetic approach to theodicy, where goodness and evil—or at least beauty and ugliness—may coexist in some kind of juxtaposed struggle for supremacy and resolution. This is linked to his adoption of Maritain's Neo-Thomist approach to the Beautiful and the Good, whereby all things within creation can be said to display those attributes temporally, and in their proper natures, where in God they exist perfectly.

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