
Foreword

In the last ten years or so, Tolkien criticism has enjoyed a new flowering, gathering professional status through the academic journal *Tolkien Studies* and a number of fine monographs. Bizarrely, *The Lord of the Rings* has finally achieved the respectability in university English departments it has long been denied through the Peter Jackson films, so that Tolkien can now be studied as an example of popular culture. Some of the most insightful critical work has attended, as Michael Halsall does in this volume, to Tolkien's religious and philosophical ideas, as exemplified in his fiction. Tolkien often spoke of his main creative work as the construction of languages, and to invent a tongue, one has to embrace an entire worldview and create syntax and grammar. In moving to create actual other worlds and cultures in which these languages are spoken, Tolkien cannot help but engage in metaphysics: his cosmos not only has to have geography, history, and culture but a consistency and a meaning which introduces the need for metaphysics. Much of the power of Tolkien's writing comes from a sense that you can go all the way down in his world, and its conception will not fail you: there will always be more to learn. It is the complete opposite of the coding of the computer game, which always comes up against the limits of its design.

Metaphysics is therefore built into the fantasy genre, as the author imagines the categories of experience, the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of his or her creation. What I find particularly compelling about Michael Halsall's claim for a Christian Neoplatonism as structuring Tolkien's metaphysics is that it accounts for another important aspect of the reading experience: its mixture of joy and melancholy. All Tolkien's writing is shot through with a sense of the sadness of life, its mutability and loss. Typically, the Jackson film balked at narrating the harrowing of the Shire, when the return of the hobbits to their homeland leads to no triumphant welcome but to the discovery of catastrophe and ruin. In Tolkien's essay *On Fairy-stories*, every happy ending has poignant grief as well as joy, and is achieved only

after the worst has transpired. And yet, the actual writing trusts in words as good things. Tolkien writes in a manner that gives every object described a kind of radiance. As G. K. Chesterton writes, “The goodness of the fairy tale was not affected by the fact that there might be more dragons than princesses; it was good to be in a fairy tale.”¹ Similarly, it is always good to be in a novel by Tolkien, so that even the Orcs, perverted elves though they may be, have a zany energy, and the mere objects are so valued that he grants them their own index at the end of *Return of the King*.

All this is made sense of in a Neoplatonic ontology, in which being is good, and evil has none being, but a lack or loss of being. Beyond the One, and especially in the realm of the material, there is mutability, change, and loss. In Michael’s scholarly investigation, he finds this Neoplatonic metaphysics structuring Middle-earth and the mythology that undergirds it. In particular, viewed through this lens, much of what is assumed to be determinist in Anglo-Saxon fashion is shown to leave the will much freer. Michael demonstrates that the way in which Tolkien conceives of his status as sub-creator under God owes much to Aquinas’s perception that we are made in the image of God, who gives life and freedom, so that we too may give life and freedom to the things that we make. More speculatively, he suggests a possible and mediated influence of John Scotus Eriugena on Tolkien’s story of Beren and Lúthien, where that creaturely freedom includes the capacity to shape-shift, to craft and change one’s own form.

Another powerful element of the Tolkien reading experience is the way the text opens to pull the reader in, so that for most readers who make it to the end of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, the novel is now part of their life, and cannot be forgotten. As Erich Auerbach described the Bible, so Tolkien’s is an omnivorous text. The reader responds and is called into the act of interpretation, holding together, for example, the two discrete endings of the novel, with Frodo in the Undying Lands and Sam at home in the Shire. As the audience of a Greek tragedy experienced both pity and fear in the cathartic effect, so the reader of Tolkien holds joy and loss, and in this way participates in the story through a kind of Neoplatonic contemplation. Michael has a great deal to say about *theosis*, philosophically, which is where the Christian version of participation is important, since it valorizes the material realm more strongly than Plotinus, and takes everything back to its source in God, where it is most itself. The amazing thing about Tolkien’s Middle-earth is that everything participates in the splendid array of creation, and is drawn to its source. We see this most clearly in the unalienated

1. G. K. Chesterton, “The Ethics of Elfland,” *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1957 [1908]), 66–102 (82).

labour of the Lothlórien elves; they put their whole selves into their work, and the result is rope that can untie itself and has an element of agency. It is more rope-like than any rope in our world, because it participates fully in being. Its created nature, to use Michael's terminology, is received as gift, as is the creativity of the elves who make it, and thus it is united to its source, and wholly radiant in pointing beyond itself to its origin.

Michael refers to Augustine quite frequently, and it is to Book 10 of Augustine's *Confessions* that I would point for an analogy with the way the world of Tolkien is marked by participation. In a celebrated rhetorical passage, Augustine questions the natural world:

I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, "We are not thy God, seek higher than we." I asked the breezy air, and the universal air with its inhabitants answered, "Anaximenes was deceived, I am not God." I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: "Neither," say they, "are we the God whom thou seekest." And I answered unto all these things which stand about the door of my flesh, "Ye have told me concerning my God, that ye are not He; tell me something about Him." And with a loud voice they exclaimed, "He made us." My questioning was my observing of them; and their beauty was their reply.²

In the same way, the reader of Tolkien questions the origin and meaning of the ents or hobbits, the flowers and trees of his Middle-earth, and is enabled to move back through the Neoplatonic triad to the Creator himself, not just by the knowledge of the creation myth of the 'Ainulindalë' but by the reading experience itself. Fragile and lovely, the things of Tolkien's world always show that they did not make themselves, but point beyond themselves to another world, a deeper reality. Like Augustine in his mystical ascent, they take us back to the mysterious source, and that mark of 'madness' is the beginning of relation and participation. With the most delicate color palette of green, heathery blue, silver, and gold Tolkien evokes a cosmos that we would all like to live in, but one that is never an end in itself. Its beauty awakens in the reader a hungering for something beyond the material, which is symbolized by the worlds beyond worlds of Tolkien's legendarium. It awakens that natural desire for the supernatural about which a Catholic theologian of Tolkien's own day, Henri de Lubac, wrote about in *Surnaturel* in 1946, which seems to breathe the air of Middle-earth.

2. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. J. G. Pilkington, in *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), Book 10, 6, 9, 144.

I commend Michael's book to all readers of Tolkien, whether they be philosophers or not. They will find in the sturdiness of his texts under philosophical scrutiny even more to admire, and in Michael's intertextual research, original and exciting insights into Tolkien's thought. Michael has worked on a range of manuscript material, including notes for the medieval poem *Pearl*. He compares Boethius to King Alfred's own translation, and suggests a Celtic overlaying of worlds. This is a rich engagement at all levels with Tolkien, full of suggestive comparisons with the tradition of the music of the spheres and with the modernist music of his own time. It is deeply scholarly but clear and accessible. And it is both Catholic in relating Tolkien to Catholic theology, including Maritain, and the Thomism of the early twentieth century, but also in its range of reference, which does full justice to Tolkien's intellectual background and his generosity of spirit, which had room for wild-men and oliphants, wereworms and Barliman's best bitter, all with the mark of createdness upon them, gifted to his readers.

Alison Milbank

November 2017