

J. R. R. Tolkien and the Post-Romantic Myth

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John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) is undoubtedly the most profoundly Catholic writer of the twentieth century. That is a bold statement, considering that the vast majority of his readers are most likely not immediately struck by his fundamentally Christian perspective on the world and probably remain unaware of even a basic Christian leaning in his work. In one sense, this fact has led to the universal acceptance of Tolkien by people of all faiths and philosophical persuasions. Yet his cross-cultural appeal is very much like that of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who is widely appreciated and often cited without reference to his Jesuit, or even Catholic, affiliation.

Like Hopkins, Tolkien wrote in reaction to a formative Oxford scholarly experience that is fundamentally Anglican, Church of England, and both authors are often presumed to be writing in the Church of England tradition. By contrast, C.S. Lewis, staunchly Anglican and re-converted to Christianity with particular guidance from Tolkien, is often presumed to be Roman Catholic. Whatever their adherence to a specific sect, these authors are each imbued with a sensibility that is both Catholic in their faith, in the larger sense of the tradition informing Anglicanism, and Romantic in their literary sensibility.

A study combining all three writers, intimately related in several ways, would be a fascinating and challenging project. This essay is more introductory, suggesting a fundamental examination of one of the Oxford trio, J. R. R. Tolkien. The basic inquiry: How does he evolve a myth, centered in his most successful and influential work, *The Lord of the Rings*, in the context of a Roman Catholic ethos to which he

tenaciously clings? The premise of this essay will be that a sort of post-Romantic myth, to be outlined below, underlies Tolkien's fiction. Such a characterization of myth can serve as a critical tool for delving deeper into his literary art. The premise here is that the twentieth-century Tolkien, like his friend, Lewis, and the Victorian Hopkins before them, is communicating in and for a post-Romantic world. Simply stated, they speak to a milieu grappling with concepts of a natural world that has become de-personalized and a God who seems distant, even irrelevant, to an enlightened modern sensibility.

Along with Hopkins, Tolkien can be said to engage with these concepts of God and cosmos from a classic Ignatian vantage point, foundational to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Readers of Tolkien eventually discover this covert assumption: Human beings inhabit a world that is essentially *Incarnational*, where an all-good and loving God has aligned himself intimately with the flawed human condition. This God dwells within creation and is ideally present to be discovered—the familiar Ignatian expression—in all things. By extension, like Hopkins, and perhaps more Lewis, Tolkien believes that the Eucharist, in its radical sense as lasting manifestation of Incarnation, grants the promise of redemption to a fallen world. A useful starting point here will consist in an exploration of Tolkien's presuppositions relating to mythmaking, those operative principles that allow him to craft a fiction that both creates new literary myth and encompasses supernatural truth, the condition of Christ as God-made-man, eternally bonding human with divine and abiding through Eucharist in a shared world of correspondences.

Thomas Shippey, a contemporary of Tolkien's in his final Oxford years, has dubbed his fellow Old English professor turned popular writer, "author of the century," the subtitle of his recent ambitious study.¹ Most critics would resist such literary accolades. But the impact of Tolkien fifty years after publication of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-1955) is quite remarkable, due in no small part to the phenomenal success of the Peter Jackson film adaptations (2001-2003). Significantly, renewed interest in the strange but somehow compelling world of Tolkien's Middle-earth coincides with a revival

¹ Thomas A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

of both discussions and depictions of myth.² Myth is either uncovered or invented. Tolkien invents a grand one, to say the least, beginning with *The Silmarillion* (published posthumously, 1977) and *The Hobbit* (1937). Tolkien has given us “mythopoeia” (his term) unmatched in intense creativity, encompassing several races of beings and their invented languages, hundreds of characters, precise and elaborate genealogies, entire epochs of history—all ostensibly both situated in, yet somehow out of, time and space.³

Tolkien supports his myth with invented language where ordinary English fails to serve. As an adolescent, Tolkien, later professor of Anglo-Saxon and Norse, was already crafting “elvish” tongues for the nascent myth: “Quenyan” based on Finnish, his favorite language, and “Sindarin,” an even more primitive elvish speech modeled in its phonology on Welsh, his second favorite language.⁴ The boy who wrote to friends in these private code languages later used this linguistic inventiveness to germinate a myth populated by Men, Elves, Hobbits, Dwarves, Wizards, Orcs, and Ents⁵—the speaking races of Middle-earth. Language preceded mythopoesis. Simply put, Tolkien out of necessity created a world in which the languages he had invented would have evolved naturally, along with peoples and their histories.

In a similar vein, one might ask if Hopkins could have “invented” (i.e., discovered) his world of intermingled nature and the divine—a “myth” of sorts—without his own early fascination with “word-

² Mention should be made of popular but compelling modern myths in process. One is the Harry Potter series of fantasy novels by J. K. Rowling, whose plots and characters have discernible affinities with Tolkien. Similarly, the multi-episode *Star Wars* cinematic saga by George Lucas borrows heavily from Tolkien, e.g., motifs of good/evil, light/darkness, and an “invisible” God-Force.

³ The appearance of massive encyclopedic guides attest to Tolkien’s prodigious myth-making effort. For example, see Robert Foster, *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth* (New York: Ballantine, 1978; first pub., 1971); and, J.E.A. Tyler, *The Tolkien Companion*, ed. S. A. Tyler (New York: St. Martins, 1976).

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 93-94.

⁵ In an explanatory note in *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin, 1937), Tolkien explained his preference for using “dwarves” and “dwarvish,” rather than the expected “dwarfs” and “dwarfish” (p. 11). A similar usage appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, where we find the forms “elves” and “elvish” (for language), and by extension, “elven” (for beings). This usage is adopted in this paper.

sounds,” leading him “step by step to develop an intransigent theory of poetry,” as described by J. Hillis Miller.⁶ First crafting the theory and then using it, he either created anew or manipulated existing speech patterns, words, phonetic dissonance, puns, and rhetorical devices. Thus could Hopkins use “a single sovereign principle”—the innovative notion of harmonious “rhyme”—to fashion “a reconstruction of the world through discovery of rhymes.”⁷ Tolkien seems to have adhered to a similar process of myth following language, each facet invented as needed, so to speak, with both language and myth affording meaning to the other as essentially interdependent realities.

A linguistic comparison between Hopkins and Tolkien would be an interesting study in itself, and especially in terms of mythmaking derived from their shared Catholic sensibilities. (Of course, implying “myth” in Hopkins is rather tenuous and is used here solely to invite comparison on the linguistic level.) If we stay with Tolkien here, we note a staunch Catholicism after his widowed mother’s conversion when he was eight. From his letters and other commentaries, we see that he founded his entire mythical world on his belief in God, even though there is an apparent anomaly evident at first sight. The major expression of the myth, *The Lord of the Rings*, contains neither God nor invocation to a deity, nor any ritual or liturgy, and no overt prayer or divinely inspired text to consult. In short, one detects no obviously stated system of religion whereby good is seen struggling to overcome the immense evil that besets the noble, even saintly, people battling to preserve the future of the world. And because Tolkien when writing is alive to recount this saga of an age long in the past, the presumption is that such a world did in fact exist and triumphed in order to pave the way for the future that is now. What is going on here, in a writer who is so essentially Catholic?

Tolkien sums up his adamant aversion to the use of overtly religious references in a letter (2 December 1953) to a close family friend and his Jesuit spiritual confidant at Oxford, Rev. Robert Murray, S.J. (grandson of Sir James Murray, original editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Robert Murray had written earlier and suggested parallels

⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; first pub., 1965), p. 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-279.

in *The Lord of the Rings*, e.g., “a positive compatibility with the order of Grace” and “references to Our Lady,” namely, the image of the elven queen Galadriel resonating with that of the Virgin Mary.⁸ While Tolkien is grateful for Murray’s “labour to criticize my work,” he carefully qualifies his own intention. After affirming that *The Lord of the Rings* “is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision,” Tolkien justifies his methodology:

That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like “religion,” ritual, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.⁹

The religious dimension is not overtly portrayed but rather “is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.” Could this reveal a fundamental principle of mythmaking operative here, and one that might tie Tolkien’s mythopoesis to that of fellow writers like Hopkins and Lewis? And is this the basis of a bold myth that may be called “post-Romantic”?

The anomaly with a writer like Tolkien is his relevance both to a fictional world peopled with figures from a Romantic era, while also appealing to a theological worldview that seeks to reaffirm Incarnation for skeptical modern minds. This vaguely defined yet comforting myth intersects both of these synchronous consciences (in a Jungian sense, as noted below): the nostalgia of an idealized Romantic era of God in his heaven setting all aright, contrasted with the real battles in post-Modern times between an often indiscernible but palpable good and a vicious evil ready to collapse a world where God is deemed absent and therefore a world not worth saving anyway. Thus, *The Lord of the Rings* continues to appeal to so many readers, the ordinary folk as well as astute critics.

It is helpful in exploring mythic paradigms in Tolkien to consider first a few classic theories of myth, ideas that occasionally find

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with Christopher Tolkien (London: Alien and Unwin, 1981), pp. 171-172.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

resonance in Tolkien. Early in the twentieth century, C. G. Jung had rejected the Freudian idea of personal consciousness as the matrix of a universal myth applied to the individual. Whereas Freud had placed the origins and functions of myth in unconscious sexual desires resonating first from one's childhood, Jung would posit as primary the "collective unconsciousness," which in Jung's construct subsumes origins, subject matter, and functions of myth. (This theory apparently evolved from Jung's reflecting on his own dreams of a great flood.) The Jungian "archetypes" form the basis of a universal mythic experience as symbols common to all human beings:

Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes.¹⁰

Whereas Jung was suspicious of religious connotations in myth, Mircea Eliade distinctly posited the sacred as mythic foundation in all societies. Myth is a "History of the acts of the Supernaturals," always related to a "creation" and therefore "by knowing the myth one knows the 'origin' of things."¹¹ Eliade argues further that one "'lives' the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred," so that myth by definition "implies genuinely 'religious' experience" by which one enters the "primordial time" of the supernatural world. Eliade concludes: "What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them."¹²

We shall see that Tolkien's mythic vocabulary is closer to Eliade's, but also not too far from Jung's. Closer still to Tolkien's "mythopoeia" is a more contemporary description of myth, a decidedly Christocentric one by Jesuit theologian Leo O'Donovan, who argues that myth is

¹⁰ In his introduction to his collection of Jung's statements, Robert Segal adds: "The subject matter [myth] is not literal but symbolic: not the external but the human mind. Myth originates and functions to satisfy the psychological need for contact with the unconscious" (*Jung on Mythology*, ed. Robert A. Segal [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], p. 3). Tolkien, with a religious qualification, would probably agree.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W.R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1954; first pub., 1907), p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

...talk of God which takes the form of a human story inasmuch as it represents the transcendent God active in history as one being among others, as part of a created world. In a positive sense, it is an inescapable dimension of all religious discourse, which can only speak of God in terms derived from experience in the world.¹³

Of course, God is certainly not “one being among others,” but in classical myths about “gods,” that is the dynamic at work. Somewhat analogously, from a Christian perspective, O’Donovan’s definition is then applied to the Christology of Karl Rahner, the Jesuit theologian who is pre-eminent in twentieth century thinking about the Incarnation, how God is in the world (i.e., “active in history”) but not of the world.

Tolkien—and perhaps similarly the Jesuit Hopkins before him—grapples with this basic problem of how God can be in, but not of, the world. A premise of our present discussion is that Tolkien arrives at a statement of post-Romantic myth in this statement of myth. God is not in a semi-pantheistic way embedded *within* nature—admittedly an extreme form of Romanticism—but is a God identified as intimately aligned to the natural world nonetheless. The Incarnation is the crucial starting point in this view. Observing the world from a perspective shared with the Catholic Hopkins, Tolkien finds the reality of Incarnationalism intrinsically operative in the myth but with his own variations or nuances as to its application.

Most important, Tolkien begins with that “inescapable dimension” (to cite O’Donovan) of affirming the divine by way of *experience*, not fantasy. For all the attention on the perceived fantastical world of Tolkien, such as fascination with *The Lord of the Rings* films or popular courses on the “philosophy” of the writer, Tolkien himself was convinced that he was telling a true story, one re-invented in his own magical imagination but nonetheless inherently true. So, the Judaeo-Christian God is not a “character,” but he is there by default, so to speak, if the myth is a re-telling of a shared reality. In other

¹³ Leo O’Donovan, S.J., ed., *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1995; first pub., 1980), pp. 193-194.

words, God's uniting himself to the visible world does not make God a creature of his own creation. As theologian Otto Hentz, S.J., remarks, God remains a transcendent creator who is "personally present in the history of the world" but whose presence is "effective in and through, not in place of, the worldly reality which God creates."¹⁴

God—i.e., Tolkien's mythic representation of God—does create the world of Middle-earth and its races of people, human and otherwise, even if this God is "absent" (or has perhaps "disappeared," to use Miller's characterization). Briefly summarized, the following comprises the larger creation myth of Middle-earth. God is Ilúvatar¹⁵ (Quenyan for "all-father") and dwelling with him is the offspring of his thought, the Ainur ("holy ones"), who are created through the Flame Imperishable of Ilúvatar's spirit. The material world, Eä, was given Being when the good Ainur were drawn to the themes of the cosmic harmonious Music, the Ainulindale ("Ainu-song"). The Vision, which is the attraction to the sacred Music, becomes Eä—the material world—when Ilúvatar gives the Vision a material realization or Being, namely, the "World That Is." What confirmed the fidelity of the Ainur and precipitated Eä was discord in the cosmic Music, an aberration created by Melkor ("He who arises in Might"), a rebellious Ainur who himself repudiated Ilúvatar by desiring to bring forth matter into Being.

Thus is the backdrop of good-versus-evil that pervades the Tolkien saga: God served by good angels who battle the nefarious one, the Satan—"enemy" in the Hebraic sense—whose traditionally cited "Non serviam!" and aspiration to be like God allow evil to corrupt and permeate what was originally a pristine good. The pure evil of Sauron (the "abominable") arrayed against the forces of good is dramatized in the complex panorama of *The Lord of the Rings*. That epic is itself merely the climax of a struggle played out over several millennia in Tolkien's private world.¹⁶

All of this sounds familiar in the Christian scheme of things, including the need for this world of a redeemer, one that will defeat

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁵ Writing to Robert Murray (4 November 1954), Tolkien speaks of "one 'god': Eru Ilúvatar" (Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 205). Tyler defines Eru as "The One" (*Tolkien Companion*, p. 162).

¹⁶ Foster, *Complete Guide*, pp. 4, 40, 210, 252, and 342 (incl. cross references).

the evil and restore the prelapsarian order. Tolkien's passion for fashioning a new myth, rather than simply redoing the established Christian version, is posited on two firmly held principles. The first is his insistence that myth is essentially *true*, contrary to the view of his Oxford friend C.S. Lewis, who protested that "myths are lies, even though lies breathed through silver."¹⁷ (To be sure, Lewis held this view before his re-conversion to Christianity.) Tolkien would adamantly insist that such things as trees and stars exist regardless of people giving them human names, which are mere labels that indicate only a subjective view of reality. One is tempted to see in Tolkien's idea of myth inklings of the Scotist notion in Hopkins of *haecceitas*, a "this-ness" at the heart of every object, or even to extrapolate "dearest freshness deep down things"¹⁸—named by the poet, but always *only* named and not created. Creation existed before language emerged to label it—a patently obvious but often obscured simple truth that lies at the heart of Tolkien's understanding of myth.

Humphrey Carpenter proceeds to craft an evocative summary of Tolkien's idea, i.e., that by naming and describing things, one is merely inventing subjective terms about these pre-existing entities, so that "just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth."¹⁹ He further sums up by citing Tolkien's rebuttal to Lewis:

We have come from God...and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming a "sub-creator" and inventing stories, can Man [aspire to return] to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall. Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, while

¹⁷ In his commentary, Carpenter reconstructs the Tolkien/Lewis debate, noting that Tolkien's seminal poem, "Mythopoeia," had been alternately titled "Misomyth" and "Philomyth to Misomyth," with one manuscript marked "for C.S.L." (Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 147).

¹⁸ Hopkins crafted this familiar quintessential phrase in the sonnet, "God's Grandeur," using this expression to affirm his belief in the doctrine of John Duns Scotus.

¹⁹ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, p. 147.

materialistic “progress” leads only to a yawning abyss and the Iron Crown of the power of evil.²⁰

As with Hopkins, for Tolkien the truth beyond the myth, indeed the truth that is the myth, is the basis of belief.

To assert myth as true, Tolkien goes beyond any elementary notion of fantasy in contemplating the world—something a pure Romanticist cannot do and still preserve a distance from Christianity—and arrives where he begins, in *faith*, that the myth does not re-present but *re-creates* a reality that lies deep down. In this sense, the essentially Incarnational Tolkien is the writer who acts as “sub-creator,” piecing together truth for humans out of many a “splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God.” And “shakily” the “true harbour,” the authenticated grounding of existence for the human comes into view. Only a golden crown awaits one in such a place, supplanting the perverse “Iron Crown” proffered by a false world that stands alienated from the divine “Music” that is creation.

Tolkien’s second controlling conviction about the nature of myth follows from the myth-as-truth principle, a conviction he shares with Jung, who declared myths as “anything but allegories of physical processes.” Tolkien insists that authentic myth is *never allegory*. (Film critics and amateur interpreters of *The Lord of the Rings* often fail to discern this essential presupposition.) Carpenter summarizes this notion by citing Tolkien on the individual psyche’s relation to myth:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and weary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse “applicability” with “allegory” but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, pp. 189-190. In a subsequent letter, Tolkien again cautions the reader not to “suspect” allegory at work: “There is a ‘moral,’ I suppose, in any tale worth telling. But that is not the same thing.” He further voices his objection to allegorizing by saying he is “annoyed” at persistent comparisons of his “Rings” saga to Wagner’s operatic tale, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. His terse response: “Both rings were round and there the resemblance ceased” (Carpenter, p. 202).

Tolkien thus spurned the authorial “purposed domination,” which is an activity precluded by his precisely rejecting a dominating allegory in favor of what “resides” in the reader’s rightful freedom. The reader is liberated by “*applicability*” (emphasis added), whereby one is free to apply symbolic relationship or not in discovering meaning for the reader. His myth can be mere entertainment to some, most recently to the millions of moviegoers who have neither inclination nor patience to read Tolkien, a prodigious undertaking in itself. Or his myth can be powerful revelation to others, both readers and viewers, and not just to Christians.

All persons, in Tolkien’s optimistic worldview, any person of whatever literary or cinematic taste, can share in the mythic reality of what is there to be freely *applied* to history, “true or feigned.” In feigning a totally fantasized history of Middle-earth, Tolkien offers anyone who engages his myth an applied truth about God and creation. In the same way that Eliade sees myth as “reiteration” of the sacred, when Tolkien tells a myth, in a sense he enters God’s “primordial” time. (This is an admittedly awkward expression—God’s eternal time surely not being “primordial”—but the argument is made analogously here.) And “God” does not have to be visibly present, only below and within, not by the mere narrative fantasy of imposed allegory but in the *truth* as revealed by “sub-creation.”

In a curious way, T. S. Eliot’s principle of “willing suspension of disbelief” may even apply to Tolkien’s creative process. When a person as “sub-creator” tells a story, what “really happens” is that he or she “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter,” a world inside of which “what he [*sic*] relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world.” The reader will “therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.” Further, in “drawing on reality,” the myth-maker hopes that the “peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it.” Tolkien could thus claim to be engaged in a “specifically Christian venture,” and one that can bring about a particularly religious outcome.²² Tolkien fills out this notion in his epilogue to “On Fairy-Stories” (part one of the essay, “Tree and Leaf”). His critical reflection notes: “The Christian may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be

²² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

redeemed,” so that “in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation.”²³

Here, then, in the peculiarly Tolkien notion of a world “effoliated”²⁴ and re-created we are given the essence of myth in this author’s universe. In short, myth is a re-statement of the Ignatian ideal familiar to writers like Tolkien. In myth the human participates in the divine, perceiving and calling forth the God who is “in all things,” God subsisting in a creation that is waiting to be effoliated, in other words, given a new coat of leaves, by the conjuring up of the myth-that-is-truth. Humans “apply” this myth to the world, see this world for what is really there below the masking surface, and evoke what is found by way of a fresh covering, thereby actually assisting God in the very process of creation.²⁵ Recalling Hopkins again, the poet would doubtless have felt comfortable with this concept of effoliation: communing with the God-Man as majestic falcon; seeing God’s radiance “flame out” in a piece of metal foil or “ooze of oil! Crushed”; or contemplating the “dappled things” that herald “beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.”²⁶ The commonality here, central to what we have been calling the post-Romantic writer, is a primacy given to Incarnation, whereby God has divinized all creation, most intimately the human race but all creation by extension. Incarnation is the ultimate effoliation for Tolkien. By God’s “in-breaking” into human history, the reality of God-made-human has become the essential *mythos*, the foundational tale through which the divine mystery can be unveiled for human understanding. Tolkien, like Hopkins, can *re-create* the truth by boldly *telling it anew*.

²³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 89.

²⁴ Note this *OED* [website text] entry for “effoliation”: “To open into leaf. Hence effoliated *ppl. a.*, that has opened into leaf. Also (with different sense) effoliation, removal of leaves (*Treas. Bot.*). 1671 GREW *Anat. Plants* i. §44 That which here befalls the now effoliated Lobes.”

²⁵ The idea of God actively creating complements the “Principle and Foundation,” the prelude meditation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola (#23). Human beings and all things in the world “are created” (emphasis added), which is interpreted as a dynamic and ongoing act of creation, in the present tense, not a completed event. (See Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans., with commentary, by George E. Ganns, S.J. [St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992], p. 32.)

²⁶ Representative notions from poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: respectively, “The Windhover,” God’s Grandeur,” “Pied Beauty,” and “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo.”

Tolkien calls this Incarnational reality the primordial “eucatastrophe,” the opposite of the negative “catastrophe,” and the artist is the sub-creator when expressing the reality in re-told myth, or “sub-creation.” Tolkien finds in the Gospel “the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe,” further qualifying its identity in “On Fairy-Stories”:

But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner consistency of reality”...the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation.²⁷

What is expressed here is Tolkien’s view of the world as Incarnational, and as a consequence, sacramentalized, i.e., infused with intrinsic holiness. He had once professed this conviction by urging his son Christopher to “make a habit of the praises,” his pious Latin devotions based on his beliefs, often expressed, that recognizing God in the universe naturally and inevitably leads one to praises of God. He counsels his son, “If you have these in your heart, you never need for words of joy.”²⁸

In Tolkien’s cosmic liturgy, all created things join in this act of praising the God who, though not synonymous with creation in the occasionally semi-pantheistic sense of some Romantics, has in fact endowed the universe with sacramental reality that proclaims God’s presence. Tolkien writes to Camilla Unwin:

Those who believe in a personal God, Creator, do not think the Universe in itself is worshipful, though devoted study of it may be one of the ways of honouring Him. And while as living creatures we are (in part) within and part of it, our ideas of God and ways of expressing them will be largely derived from contemplating the world about us.²⁹

²⁷ Tolkien, *Tolkien Reader*, pp. 88-89.

²⁸ Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 66.

²⁹ Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 400. Tolkien was replying to a letter, in 1969, from the granddaughter of his publisher, Stanley Unwin. Camilla had asked, “What is the purpose of life?” She was requesting help on the theme of a school writing project.

Such a contemplation of the created world and the Creator's place in it aligns Token, at least in a limited sense, with the Romantic sensibility, borne out in the aesthetic focus that first served a poet like Hopkins. Tolkien is the Romantic author crying in the wilderness of a chaotic twentieth-century world and trying to lead human beings back to a shared condition of creation imbued with God, not deprived of the Creator. God is "absent" only in perception, never in truth.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion of the Incarnational emphasis in Tolkien's myth, there is a corollary principle, one that he also shares with Hopkins, and that is a Eucharistic perspective. Once again, reference to the Ignatian vision of Hopkins is useful here. For Hopkins, belief in the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist was "the chief attraction to Catholicism," and brought him to the conviction that this doctrine alone can destroy the "sordidness" in the world, a condition from which Protestantism offered no remedy.³⁰ From this perspective, the universe, flawed by Original Sin, is made over into a holy realm through Incarnation, with Christ remaining—by way of Real Presence—tangibly in the world through Eucharist. Tolkien considered Eucharist as primary in eucatastrophe. In a long letter to his son Michael, in 1963, he gives an impassioned defense of the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine consumed as Eucharist. His primary concern as a father is to bolster the young man, who is battling doubts about his faith. Tolkien does this tenderly, encouraging his son to be strengthened through frequent reception of Holy Communion: "The only cure for sagging or fainting faith is Communion."³¹ Much earlier in the gloom of war, in 1941, he had written to Michael: "Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament."³² Sharing in Eucharist—as the Real Presence of Christ himself—is the graced means by which human beings participate in the divine goodness that pervades the world.

A typical edition of *The Lord of the Rings* comprises about eleven hundred pages of text. In this brief introduction to its mythic substrata,

³⁰ Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p. 6.

³¹ Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 338.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

we can only begin here to suggest some facets of how this myth is sustained. Eucharist is an ideal example to cite. It is simply there—subtly and subliminally, like every mythic element in the novels—but it is present to be contemplated and relished, in the form of a “bread of life” motif, the *lembas* that is given to Frodo and his companions by the Elves. To the unsuspecting reader, especially one with little sense of a sacramental dimension or Real Presence in Eucharist, the *lembas* bread is merely magic, the kind of gift one would expect as from magical creatures like Elves. After all, they are a noble race and committed, with Men, to defeat Sauron and the power of the evil Ring.

For Tolkien, however, who intends his symbols to be applied—and the reader has that total freedom of applicability—the bread is life sustaining sacrament. Once again, this is not allegory, but a symbol endowed with all the necessary and essential qualities, waiting for application to evoke fullness of meaning. The *lembas* bread is only one example, but a vital one, of how Tolkien provides points of applicability, inviting the reader to make sense of his myth. In the same way, the inherent goodness of the nine members of the Fellowship of the Ring makes sense in combating Sauron’s obviously consummate evil. Frodo and Sam need life for their mission; people need sustenance for life. Good Elves provide a bread of life; a good God gives the Bread of Life, Eucharist, the ultimately “good gift,” in its Greek root. As Tolkien reminded his son, it is “the one great thing to love on earth.”

The elven queen, Galadriel (the “Lady of Lórien”), gave the *lembas* to the nine companions during their stay in Rivendell, the enchanted refuge of the Elves. Defined as “waybread” (in the ancient elvish tongue, Sindarin), *lembas* is to be nourishment throughout the perilous journey to return the Ring for its destruction at Mount Doom. A small quantity of bread suffices for the whole day, for the companions are instructed that “it is more strengthening than any food made by Men.”³³ In numerous references to the *lembas* throughout the remainder of the novels, it can be seen as *viaticum*, Eucharist that is given to one who is dying or in perilous sickness or circumstances.

Early on, this wondrous bread gives the companions vigor for the quest: “Often in their hearts they thanked the Lady of Lórien for the

³³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 1994; and, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.; first pub., 1954-1955), p. 360.

gift of *lembas*, for they could eat of it and find new strength even as they ran.”³⁴ Rationed and guarded, it sustains especially Frodo and Sam in the final, most perilous part of their trek in Mordor and ascent of Mount Doom. They are in the realm of the Dark Lord, Sauron, and just as any Christian on life’s journey needs Eucharist as a shield against the devil prowling about, the *lembas* protects Frodo and Sam. Totally disconsolate, exhausted with the terror of fear on Mount Doom, Frodo is consoled in his “dark thoughts”:

...though weary and under a shadow of fear, he still had some strength left. The *lembas* had a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire [for ordinary food]...And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. *It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure* (emphasis added), and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.³⁵

Using the principle of applicability, the reader may choose to find in this bread a powerful and satisfying evocation of Communion. Or it can be simply read as magic of Elves. Given the central place that Eucharist holds in Tolkien’s personal faith, *lembas* can suggest a sort of *panis angelicus*, with Elves possibly angelic creatures in his myth: the bread that feeds the will endows with endurance when facing mortal peril. But this is only one application available to the reader and is not imposed by the author, who deliberately rejects any constraining allegory. By extension, furthermore, such an application regarding *lembas* is consistent. The devil is thought to recoil at the sight of Eucharist, the body of Christ. In the same way, Gollum, thoroughly corrupted by the evil power of the Ring, is repulsed by *lembas* and even “chokes” on it.³⁶ Like Eucharist, *lembas* engenders life and satisfying nourishment solely for benevolent beings.

This is but one limited exercise in discovering Tolkien’s Incarnational undercurrents, the grandest being the pervasive correspondence between good and evil, light and darkness, fertility and

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 915.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 639, e.g.

death, those who are redeemed and those lost.³⁷ A larger study of the relationship of these themes to the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* awaits, and would be a valuable enterprise in explicating the Catholic Tolkien. His Jesuit affinities, especially with Robert Murray, might properly suggest such a reading. A final over-arching theme, the king as savior, can serve as representative of this critical approach. At the heart of the Exercises (#95), St. Ignatius challenges the retreatant to contemplate “The Call of the King”, describing a meditation on this choice. Which king would one choose to serve, the earthly or the divine, who is Christ? The choice is clear:

If we give consideration to such a call from the temporal king to his subjects, how much more worthy of our consideration it is to gaze upon Christ our Lord, the eternal King [and to answer his call]... “whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in glory.” (*Exercises* #95)³⁸

Among several Christ-figures (Gandalf and Frodo, for example), Aragorn is a major exemplar, if, once again, the freedom of the reader chooses to apply the many symbolic savior traits in this way. He is *the* king who is destined to return, and he constantly rallies the companions of the Ring and the cohorts like no other person in the saga. Aragorn is often described in veritable Christ-like terms reminiscent of the apocalyptic triumph of Christ and his angels in the Book of Revelation. In the climactic conclusion of the crucial battle at Helm’s Deep, just before the sounding of the awesome and terrifying “horn of Helm,” we read:

So great a power and royalty was revealed in Aragorn, as he stood there alone above the ruined gates before the host of his enemies... There was a roar and a blast of fire. The archway of the gate above which he had stood a moment before crumbled and crashed in smoke and dust. The barricade was scattered as if by a thunderbolt³⁹

³⁷ In several chapters of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (cited above), Thomas Shippey provides masterful discussion of these multiple themes of contrast, viewed in the context of the classical Christian tradition.

³⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 54.

³⁹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 528.

The true king commands the scene, even as a lesser king and Aragorn's surrogate for now, Theoden (himself a Christ-like leader), rides out as the "sudden and terrible" horn is sounded, and "All that heard that sound trembled." It is Aragorn who summons and prevails. The resulting victory is not just over evil combatants. It is a transformative event: "The land had changed...now a forest loomed," and "now cowered the proud hosts of Sauron, in terror of the king and in terror of the trees."⁴⁰ One may apply the coming of life-giving trees to the city of New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2), at the final battle that is won by Christ and his angels over Satan and Death. Where evil, barrenness, corruption, and death once reigned, now prevail only good, fertility, restoration, and life.

When Aragorn does finally and definitively arrive to reveal his kingship as heir in Gondor, his appearance is even more regal, with jubilation, as a sort of Second Coming, with echoes of the Resurrection:

Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the Sea to the Kingdom of Gondor; and the mirth of the Rohirrim was a torrent of laughter and a flashing of swords, and the joy and wonder of the City was a music of trumpets and a ringing of bells.⁴¹

And what of the Orcs and assembled other malevolent creatures, who war against the king? The Dark Lord's "hosts of Mordor were seized with bewilderment...and a black dread fell upon them, knowing that the tides of fate had turned against them and their doom was at hand."⁴²

The foregoing examples of symbolic evocation in *The Lord of the Rings* lead to complex strata of potential "applications" waiting to be discovered in this curious universe that is Middle-earth. It is fascinating to meet Tolkien devotees in whom an inimitable pleasure abounds in seeking out and claiming these points of resonance. Whether this process serves Christian or secular ends, either by applying specific religious imagery or merely in relishing the exhilarating spectacle of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.829.

⁴² *Ibid.*

pure good thoroughly defeating totally recognizable evil, the reader is amply rewarded. Especially fascinating is Tolkien's ability to make the reader "feel good" in seeing evil vanquished. Something in his tale touches a fundamental myth that humans want to believe is true, even if life often indicates the opposite. We want to believe that good is always stronger than evil, and that no matter how terrorized we become, a final triumph by brute evil will never succeed.

Commenting on Tolkien's achievement, W.H. Auden provides a succinct, instructive insight into this quintessential optimism in the human collective consciousness:

Evil...has every advantage but one—it is inferior in *imagination* (emphasis added). Good can imagine the possibility of becoming evil—hence the refusal of Gandalf and Aragorn to use the Ring—but Evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself. Sauron cannot imagine any motives except lust for domination and fear so that, when he has learned that his enemies have the Ring, the thought that they might try to destroy it never enters his head, and his eye is kept toward Gondor and away from Mordor and the Mount of Doom.⁴³

In effect, the evil here consumes itself: Sauron's obsession for regaining the Ring—assuring the triumph of evil—allows Frodo to complete his mission of the good, to destroy the Ring and the evil it embodies.

Why is this possible? Auden in a sense restates an essential component of the Post-Romantic myth. It is only a divine and personal God, not some "personalized" spirit of Nature—no matter how beneficent or "divine" one may perceive it to be—that can infuse goodness into creation. Only the Incarnation can enable the imagination to participate in a benevolence that is naturally inherent in a human condition made sacramental. Only good can imagine and *choose* the good, in this case to destroy the Ring and its attendant evil. Evil, by contrast, can imagine only a furthering of itself. The ultimate irony: evil can imagine only its own self-annihilation. In opting for the good, author and created character mutually share in the "true light, the eternal truth that is with God," each a "sub-creator" to fathom the

⁴³ W.H. Auden, "At the End of the Quest, Victory," review of *The Return of the King* (Part Three of *The Lord of the Rings*), *New York Times*, January 22, 1956, p. 226.

myth and by “inventing stories...steer however shakily towards the true harbor.”⁴⁴ The ending of *The Lord of the Rings* ineluctably brings the blessed and heroically virtuous persons like Frodo to the “true harbor,” the paradise of the Grey Havens.⁴⁵

This is but one reading, an application that Tolkien encourages the reader to discover, justified by his principle of applicability, which purposely eschews the constraints of allegory. Others find alternate relationships to whatever core meaning resides in this grand myth of the Ring. And such is exactly Tolkien’s truly universal appeal, both believers and just plain fans, whether in text, film, or video game format. Dismissing the limitations of allegory for the inclusiveness of applicability is at once brilliant and practical, for his version of post-Romantic myth abounds in treasures of both lush entertainment and profound enlightenment. Tolkien’s Incarnational and Eucharistic vision of a world that was resides in his imagination as well as, he believes, in the collective human psyche that longs for the Garden of Eden. Discerning the fullness of that vision may serve to unveil this “author of the century” and his message of hope for all peoples, in every age and place. ☞

⁴⁴ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, p. 147.

⁴⁵ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 1007.