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Tolkien's Literary Faith

ABSTRACT

J.R.R Tolkien made deep connections between his studies, his writing and his faith. Although he explored these directly in such as the anthology *Tree and Leaf*, perhaps the best expression of his ideas lies in his more imaginative works. This article is an inductive exploration of a poem and two stories by Tolkien, with some reference to his letters and the essays, considering both his literary ideas, the densely Christian nature of his writing, and the theological musings that arose there-from.

> …Out of the shadows of legend I begin a little to understand the marvel of the trees, I think. I have lived to see strange days. Long we have tended our beasts and our fields, built our houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to our children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.[54]

In recent decades, theology, particularly that of the 'postliberals', has drawn often and heavily upon literary and linguistic sources. This has been partially prompted by the literary turn of philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida, and partially by the recognition by theologians such as Hans Frei, following Karl Barth, of the densely literary nature of the biblical revelation. Thus Marcus Eliade, Eric Auerbach, and Northrop Frye are relatively frequently cited in the theological literature.

[54] The speech of Theoden, King, upon seeing Ents for the first time in *The Two Towers* in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings (LoTR)* (London Harper Collins, 1997) (includes *The Fellowship of the Ring,* (1954), *The Two Towers,* (1954) and *The Return of the King* (1955)), 536f.

Well before this literary turn, however, professional scholars of literature and language, such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien were pondering the connections between their studies and their faith, and making some provocative suggestions. One of the best known of these is the lecture Tolkien gave 'On Fairy Stories' published in the anthology *Tree and Leaf*. While, even there, Tolkien tends towards the metaphorical and allusive it remains a relatively clear statement of his thought. Perhaps the best expression of the ideas therein, however, is not in the propositional form appropriate to the lecture hall, but in his more imaginative works.

The Lord of the Rings.

The Lord of the Rings is certainly Tolkien's best-known work, and there are more than enough volumes analysing it.[55] I will, therefore, do no more than dabble in the shallow end before moving on:

In the first chapter,[56] after a few introductory paragraphs linking the present work to Tolkien's previous story, *The Hobbit*, we meet, not the main characters, but two local worthies sharing beer and gossip at an inn called *The Green Dragon*. 'The Gaffer,' old Gamgee who works in the garden of the (at this point) main character, Bilbo, and Sandyman, the miller, are the chief protagonists in a conversation about Bilbo's eccentricities – one of which is his teaching the Gaffer's son, Sam, to read. The Gaffer continues by saying:

> '*Elves and Dragons!* I says to him. *Cabbages and potatoes are better for me and you. …'*

The scene is reprised in the next chapter,[57] a decade later, by the protagonist's sons, Sam Gamgee and Ted Sandyman, again at the inn:

> 'Queer things you do hear these days, to be sure,' said Sam.
> 'Ah,' said Ted, 'you do, if you listen. But I can hear fireside-tales and children's stories at home, if I want to.'
> 'No doubt you can,' retorted Sam, 'and I daresay there's more truth in some of them than you reckon. Who invented the stories anyway? Take dragons now.'

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[55] See Ralph C. Wood, 'Following the Many Roads of Recent *Tolkien* Scholarship**',** *Christianity & Literature* (Summer 2005, Vol. 54 Issue 4), 587-608.
[56] *LoTR*, 24ff.
[57] Ibid. 43f.

> 'No thank 'ee,' said Ted, 'I won't. I heard tell of them when I was a youngster, but there's no need to believe in them now. There's only one Dragon in Bywater, and that's Green,' he said, getting a general laugh.

Ted responds to Sam's stories of wonders with a hard-nosed ridicule, until finally Sam comes to talk of the departure from mortal lands of the immortal elves:

> 'They are sailing, sailing, sailing over the Sea, they are going into the West and leaving us,' said Sam, half chanting the words, shaking his head sadly and solemnly. But Ted laughed.
> 'Well, that isn't anything new, if you believe the old tales. And I don't see what it matters to me or you. Let them sail! But I warrant you haven't seen them doing it; nor anyone else in the Shire.'
> 'Well, I don't know,' said Sam thoughtfully. He believed he had once seen an Elf in the woods, and still hoped to see more one day. Of all the legends that he had heard in his early years such fragments of tales and half-remembered stories about the Elves as the hobbits knew, had always moved him deeply. 'There are some, even in these parts, as know the Fair Folk and get news of them,' he said. 'There's Mr. Baggins now, that I work for. He told me that they were sailing and he knows a bit about Elves. And old Mr. Bilbo knew more: many's the talk I had with him when I was a little lad.'
> 'Oh, they're both cracked,' said Ted. 'Leastways old Bilbo *was* cracked, and Frodo's cracking. If that's where you get your news from, you'll never want for moonshine. …'

Sam and Ted are Tolkien's 'Everymen', and these conversations, though apparently trivial asides in the book, reflect some important features of his poetics. Taking, for example, the mere fact of their inclusion, it is a matter of record that Tolkien wrote his epic work with little in the way of a plan or plot, introducing major characters without any idea of who they were or what their role would eventually be.[58] Nevertheless, in his reworking of the book over a considerable period of time, Tolkien produced a finely

[58] See on this Tolkien's own words in the preface to *Tree and Leaf (including the poem Mythopoeia)* (London: Grafton, 1992 (1988, 1964)).

coherent plot with an almost obsessive concern for details.[59] 'Asides' such as these, then, in the finished work, can be taken to have some meaning significant to Tolkien. They in fact introduce a sub-plot which doesn't reach its conclusion until nearly a thousand pages later,[60] when these relationships and their divergent opinions come once more upon the scene and can be evaluated in the light of all that has passed in between. The two characters represent two very different approaches to the 'facts' of life, and Tolkien very clearly vindicates Sam as best representing his own views.[61] Before we come to his more theoretical works, then, let us see what we may glean from this passage.

Firstly, Sam has 'learned his letters.' Tolkien consistently values literary learning. He does not despise those whose station has made such learning unnecessary or impossible, but where a literary soul or nation is to be found, Tolkien regards it highly.[62] Literature, in and of itself, has value to him as one means by which the mundane is transcended. This becomes clearer in the poem 'Mythopoeia'.

Secondly, the fantastic and the inane are early opposed; 'Elves and Dragons' versus 'cabbages and potatoes'. And yet this opposition is not as obvious as it first appears, because in middle-earth[63] where Tolkien lays his tale, both Elves and Dragons have existence as valid as that of garden vegetables. Ted Sandyman pours scorn on Sam's interest in Dragons, and yet Tolkien expects that most readers of *LotR* would have already read *The Hobbit*, which has at the centre of the story a ferocious, wily, fire-breathing dragon. And in the present work, as in the previous, Elves are not only

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[59] H. Carpenter, H. *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1978), 206f.

[60] *LotR*, 993.

[61] It is always a mistake to assume that any one character in a well-written literary work simply represents the author's perspective – or even that of 'the implied author'. The opinions of fictional characters serve first and foremost to elucidate the character which holds them and their role in the plot. Authorial perspective can be discerned, but not by some simple equation such as 'What Sam says = what Tolkien believes.'

[62] Thus Tolkien was a philologist, not an anthropologist; he was interested in the development of languages, not humans as such.

[63] Middle-Earth is not, as some have supposed, a purely fantasy world but this world at some point in its pre-history; between Adam and Abraham. It is a temporal rather than a spatial shift and is assumed to have continuity with our own world today. See *The Letters of JRR Tolkien* edited by H. Carpenter and C. Tolkien (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 220. See also *Tree and Leaf,* 16 for the literary effect of such gulfs in time.

present, but their story frames *LotR* completely.[64] That Ted dismisses these creatures as 'moonshine' even whilst he half-heartedly acknowledges their existence, indicates a preference, perhaps prevalent among the Hobbits, for that which is familiar, close-at-hand, and of pragmatic value. Tolkien is opposing a perspective which denies the importance of the transcendent rather than the reality of it.

The 'This-worldly' character of mythical elements such as dragons and 'the Fair Folk' are an important feature of Tolkien's thought, indicating that he sees a divide lying, not between those who believe in a 'heavenly' or 'other-worldly' truth, and those who insist upon an earth-bound philosophy, but rather between those who see in the elements of this world truths that point beyond themselves, and those who see in the same elements little more than the inane. This distinction occurs in Tolkien's thought over and again; he is not disputing the 'facts' as such, but rather the meaning of those 'facts'.

Thirdly, Ted initially dismisses Sam's interests on the grounds that he can hear 'children's stories' at home. They are unimportant because they belong to children and the domestic hearth. Later, he dismisses them on the grounds that Sam cites Misters Bilbo and Frodo Baggins as his authorities, gentlemen who are believed by Sandyman senior to be 'queer' and Sandyman junior to be 'cracked.' Tolkien objected strongly to the marginalisation of the fantastic as the proper concern for children or for lunatics only.[65] There are here two concerns; one is that fantasy (the literary element Tolkien describes as being at the heart of Fairy Story or Mythology) has validity for the educated and the wise at least as much as for the child and the crazed. Of Fairy stories, he says with Sam - 'there's more truth in some of them than you reckon.' and then goes on to ask 'Who invented the stories anyway?' For Tolkien, the philologist, the question of origins was important.[66] Secondly, though, there is a typically Tolkienian sensitivity to 'little people'[67] who in their simplicity and

[64] This 'frame' was considered by Tolkien to be his main work, and was unpublished in his life-time - *Letters,* 38 & 285.

[65] *Tree and Leaf*, 36ff

[66] Though not essential to the understanding of the text; see his 'Tower' analogy 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.' *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245–95.

[67] The wanderer in Tolkien's early work *The Cottage of Lost Play* wonders at the small size of the house (an entrance to the land of *Faerie)*, and is told 'Small is the dwelling, but smaller still are they that dwell here – for all that enter must become very small indeed, or of their own good wish become as very little folk even as

shrewdness 'keep faith' in a way in which many of their more sophisticated 'betters' have abandoned. This theme is replayed several times throughout Tolkien's epic,[68] but is here rooted in the very common-place world of the Hobbits, where, even though they are all little people, some are socially smaller than others, and as such maintain a greater humility before authority and perhaps a greater openness to different realities as they have fewer fences to defend.

Finally, Sam and his Gaffer in advancing their opinions both refer to the kindness and generosity of their patrons, the Bagginses, as against the all-too-prudential interests of the Sandymans. Tolkien here introduces the notion of good fellowship that lies at the emotional heart of the tale he goes on to tell. Ted, of his own resources and wit dismisses Sam's fantasy interests; Sam, by contrast, references several others – who Ted then ridicules in turn. Against the witnesses of personal experience and learning, Sandyman brings *argumentum ad hominum*. It plays well to the crowd, but it doesn't convince Sam, ultimately the most important of all Tolkien's characters as a model of Christian discipleship.

This initial reading gives us a thumb-nail sketch of key Tolkienian concerns:

- For literacy, against illiteracy.
- For the oral literacy of the 'Fairy-tale' and against those who, perhaps in an attempt to attain 'adult' sophistication, despise these, inducing in themselves a sort of deep illiteracy as to transcendent truths.

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they stand upon the threshold' (J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales Part 1*. (Christopher Tolkien, Ed.) (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 14). In commenting on the relative appropriateness of otherwise of fairy stories for children in his essay 'On Fairy Stories', he says 'there is a truth in Andrew Lang's words, 'He that would enter into the realm of Faerie should have the heart of a little child.' For that possession is necessary to all high adventure, into kingdoms both less and far greater than Faerie. But humility and innocence – these things 'the heart of a child' must mean in such a context – do not necessarily imply an uncritical wonder…' (Ibid, 42)

[68] Instances of this may be seen in the presumptions of Eomer and Hama in regard to Theoden, of Faramir and Beregond in relation to Denethor, of the true-hearted Hobbits of the Fellowship of the Ring contrasted with the corruptible Boromir.

- For 'little people' who are open to transcendent truths, and against the hard-nosed pragmatism of policy-makers and their followers.
- For good fellowship, and for humility in the face of learning and experience, and against the witty but superficial 'independent thinker'.

In Tolkien's writing the attitude towards the transcendent and the means of understanding the transcendent is framed by these concerns. They are the concerns of a specific time and place in our intellectual history; – early 20th Century Oxbridge against the backdrop of the 19th Century. And yet, in engaging with the disputes of his day,[69] Tolkien drew upon the resources of many ages, and thus was enabled also to continue to speak to the ages yet to come. His vision of reality, his 'metaphysics', and his understanding of the place of literature in that, though translated to us in the idiom of his own context[70] continues to resonate today with readers from around the globe, as evidenced by a burgeoning market for 'Tolkien studies'.[71]

To proceed down the path of understanding Tolkien's literary imagination we need to turn to the explicit statement of his poetics in the essay 'On Fairy Stories' from *Tree and Leaf*. Rather than travelling the direct route, however, we will be better served by a more circuitous approach, which allows us to enter into that territory with greater sympathy for the ideas expressed there, by first surveying the poem 'Mythopoeia', then noting the salient points of the short, allegorical story 'Leaf by Niggle', both also found in *Tree and Leaf*.

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[69] Against, e.g. Skinner and Russell's materialistic determinism in Wood, 'Recent Tolkien Scholarship'.

[70] A trite example of this is his unthinking use of what we would now describe as sexist language.

[71] See, e.g. D. Smitherman, 'Revised Editions of Tolkien Scholarship' in *Rocky Mountain Review,* (Spring, 2003) and Wood, 'Recent Tolkien Scholarship'.

Mythopoeia

The superscription, to 'Misomythus' is to C.S. (Jack) Lewis, as Christopher Tolkien makes clear.[72] This was at an early stage of their relationship, and Lewis was apparently arguing at this time for a materialism that he later repudiated entirely. The larger context of the poem, however, is not merely an argument for the transcendental over materialism, but an argument for a specifically Christian reality and a specifically literary means of apprehending that reality. We don't know how much of the content of this poem was expressed in that early discussion, as it was obviously composed over a period of time following those events, and may well have drawn upon a variety of other conversations and sources as inspiration. Its primary value here, however, is not as a monument on C.S. Lewis's Damascene road but as Tolkien's succinct and deeply personal statement of commitment to a transcendent reality and the necessity of a literary approach to it.

In the first verse Tolkien lampoons the scientism of his day and logical positivism. That is, he opposes those movements that proposed to read the 'facts' of the matter in a purely materialistic and reductionist or 'analytic' manner.

His next verse introduces the idea of creation, and natural elements and events (including, apparently, evolution) as having their origin in God. Beyond this, however, he evokes something of the strangeness and wonderfulness of creation, and the fact that as one of nature's operations, these are experienced sensuously and neurologically by people.

The third verse is key as in it Tolkien identifies speech as the means by which neurological/sense impressions become something more than either; speech, by naming reality, makes other cognitive operations possible. Via the medium of language we imagine possible futures, we evaluate reality, and we experience joy in it.[73] These operations go far beyond a simple 'record or photograph' of sense impressions as though we were merely machines.

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[72] Preface to *Tree and Leaf*, 7. Whilst much has been made of the divisions between Tolkien and Lewis, these should not be allowed to overshadow the reality of a warm, mutually respectful, and professionally profitable relationship spanning many years.

[73] It is noteworthy that Tolkien here follows Augustine in identifying a trinity of cognitive operations by which to evoke human thought.

Tolkien also attributes to humanity inherent powers of knowing ourselves *as part of a natural order*, experiencing within ourselves 'movements' by which we understand ourselves to be in relation to our environment in its specific details (trees and stars, etc.). Given the prior reference to God's making precisely these details, this must be understood as the order of creation. The epistemological focus in this verse, however, is on sense and experience, not special revelation; i.e. Tolkien emphasises the human side of the equation rather than the divinity he names. Nevertheless, it is significant that he sees human 'story-telling' as necessarily taking place within a mythological framework.[74]

But what are these 'movements'? What are the 'great powers' we bring out of ourselves? The last lines of this verse, perhaps confusingly, refer to 'elves …in the mind'. Tolkien says elsewhere 'my 'elves' are only a representation of an apprehension of a part of human nature'… 'and … the art and poetry of men is largely dependent on it, or modified by it.'[75]

In other words, Tolkien here uses mythological language for what we would describe as a psychological fact – the cognitive capability to imagine, to make 'stories' that have meaning, to make 'myths' such as those he goes on to describe. In doing so he recalls the ancient Greek idea of an attendant daemon or muse recently popularised by Phillip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, but well-known to Tolkien and his colleagues.[76] This verse, with its self-justifying mythological language, is the heart of Tolkien's claim for poetics, and reaches its climax with verse four; we are informed in all our understandings, all our stories of ourselves and our universe, by what are ultimately 'mythological' concerns.

In verse four Tolkien fleshes out his understanding of the role of such myth-making as lending value and meaning to the universe; stars, heaven and earth, he suggests, only have beauty and meaning to us because of their mythological associations. As Polanyi has suggested, every element of our knowledge is dependent upon just such an appreciation of value; every research decision is guided by intuitive, even aesthetic, considerations.

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[74] In this Tolkien concurs with Northrop Frye, whose second essay in the *Anatomy of Criticism* notes that poesis by its nature assumes the limits of the conceivable, rather than the limits of experience, and therefore places nature within a mythological setting rather than allowing nature to set the limits of imagination. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press,1957), 115ff.

[75] *Letters,* 149

[76] see e.g. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*; *An introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967 (1964)), 215.

Tolkien here makes a similar affirmation; we see nothing if we do not allow a pre-existing awareness of meaningfulness to guide our seeing. Such meaningfulness, inevitably in Tolkien's view, has its roots in mythological understandings.

If verses three and four are the heart of Tolkien's poetics, the theological centre of this poem is found in verse five. It is notable that he here refers to God as the 'only Wise', a title that, whilst it reserves the uniqueness of God, leans heavily towards the wisdom tradition, with its exploration of the meaning of human life in its day-day detail and human reflection, rather than in great events or revelations.

With that hint as background, Tolkien roots his claims for poetics, for that which arises in 'the heart of man', in his understanding of the *imago Dei* – we are 'makers' of Myth because we image the Maker.[77] Having referenced, once again, the creation story, Tolkien must then deal with the darkness which that story brings to us – the fall as well as the creation of man. He describes it relationally as an estrangement, and also as being out of 'grace'.[78] He hints at the poverty of the prodigal as well as the fall of Nebuchadnezzar, in referring to the 'rags of lordship' we retain. The burden of the statement, however, is aimed at moderating the impact of the fall. It is severe, but not total. Despite texts such as Jeremiah 17.9 and the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, we can rely upon truth at the core of our being, a wisdom that remains with us as a remnant of the image of God. Thus we are not wholly lost, nor wholly changed from what we were made. Nor have we been dethroned – the creation mandate yet rests upon us. This command to subdue the earth as *imago Dei* is here interpreted by Tolkien as a command to involve creation in a new creative enterprise –we are, under God, sub-creators.[79]

Tolkien refines this image with the idea of 'light', meaning at the very least the knowledge referred to above as a 'movement', a 'vein of spirit' perhaps

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[77] This is stated explicitly in *Tree and Leaf,* 52

[78] Given Tolkien's vivid awareness of medieval thinking, 'grace' should probably be understood here to mean something more like 'favour' as well as the more strictly theological '*charis*'. Tolkien is making at least one pun at this point, though with an eye to an abundance of meaning rather than simply humour.

[79] See *Tree and Leaf,* 50ff, where Tolkien quotes this section of the poem in his essay 'On Fairy Stories' to make this point.

an apprehension of the 'other' or the transcendent.[80] This light is refracted through us and finds thus a multiplicity of new expressions that can be communicated to others. Tolkien goes on to acknowledge that we might, in our sub-creative use of this knowledge, create badly and even propose evil – but that it is our 'right' to do so; that is, it is an inherent part of being human that we can and should make the attempt to imagine transcendent reality. This essential aspect of human nature, imaging our creator in our creativity and particularly in our use of language is Tolkien's theological home base in this poem. As Ralph Wood puts it,[81]

> For Tolkien, we are made in the image of God primarily because we are speaking creatures. The other animals can duplicate almost every human deed except one: the act of articulate breath called speech. It is our chief means for communication and thus for creativity. Tongue and mind are co-eval, Tolkien liked to say:[82] language and thought come into being at the same time. As products of the *Logos,* we are creatures of *logoi.*

In verse six Tolkien returns to contemporary arguments, perhaps tilting here at Freud, Feuerbach, and maybe Nietzsche too. He doesn't duck the possibility that the specific 'dreams' or myths by which we express and partially fulfil our desire for transcendence are misled and merely escapism.[83] but he rebuts the accuser by asking where such a desire comes from in the first place? Tolkien points to the all-too-contemporary reality of evil to make the point that we do, in fact, have a standard of values which in and of itself justifies the desire for something better than that which is.

Verses seven to nine are beatitudes for myth-makers. They are those who have not succumbed to materialism and consumerism, socialism or capitalism ('organised delight in lotus isles of economic bliss'). They remember the 'night', with its overtones of the chthonic forces pressing in upon the ancient Anglo-Saxon mead hall[84] and the hour of evil in St John's Gospel; both of which are echoed in the Sauronic darkness in *LotR.*

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[80] See Augustine's *City of God* Bk. XI, Ch.27 for a possible tributary of this stream of thought: 'That spiritual light with which our mind is somehow irradiated, so that we can form right judgements of all things.'
[81]Wood, 'Recent Tolkien Scholarship', 588-9.
[82] In the essay 'On Fairy Stories', 24.
[83] Dealt with more fully in 'On Fairy Stories', 55 – 61.
[84] Wood, 'Recent Tolkien Scholarship', 592.

They have no converse with evil though they live in its shadow. Thus far they stand above the godless philosophers of the previous verse.

These are humble and even pitiful creatures, however; their works are dignified not by their substance, but by what they point towards: their room is small and bare, their tools clumsy, but what they make is 'gilded by the far-off day'. This is a shift in orientation; previously Tolkien has found justification for the value of mythopoeia in human origins, now he finds it in our destiny. Our 'little arks, though frail and poorly filled' are 'steered through seas contrary towards a wraith; a rumour of a harbour.' The destination is 'guessed by faith'. The coming day is 'hoped and believed in under Shadow's sway.' These verses extol the virtue of hope[85] or faith, especially in the context of difficulty, darkness and frailty. Here is a key insight; that our inherent ability to conceive of transcendence needs to have a point to which it can harness itself by the operation of hope or faith; a 'Day' or 'Harbour' from which we take our bearings.

Verse ten continues to extol the myth-makers in similar terms; the enemy is now named 'Death', with its implications of ultimate defeat and despair for humanity, or the alternative (an easier despair perhaps) of the lotus-isles of 'economic bliss'. Not only do the poets warn us of the dangers of such delusions, however, but they encourage us to do what we can against the enemy by 'kindling our hearts with legendary fire,' showing us both our present and our past in the light of the eschaton.

Complimenting the three beatitudes of verses seven to nine, verse eleven contains three statements, wishes by which Tolkien identifies himself with each of the blessed images of Mythopoeia in reverse order. Beginning with that of the minstrels with power to 'stir the unseen', then the mariners who may 'pass beyond the fabled West',[86] he completes the series by returning to the 'beleaguered fools' behind locked doors[87]

> where their gold,
> impure and scanty, yet they loyally bring

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[85] Hope, or acting as though hope were possible when all hope has fled, is the highest virtue of *LotR*, as demonstrated especially by Sam (pp 888, 901, 913, 918), but also by Pippin (749), Gandalf (797), and a host of other characters, especially Aragorn (pp 1035-6) whose elvish name, *Estel* means 'hope'.

[86] This is certainly not a reference to Western Europe, nor America, but probably the legendary isle of Atlantis, to which Tolkien's own mythical Numenor is related.

[87] In the repeated motif of the locked door we find a glimpse of that rejection of modern life characteristic of Tolkien (*Tree and Leaf*, 56-60, Carpenter, 130).

> to mint in image blurred of distant king,
> or in fantastic banners weave the sheen
> heraldic emblems of a lord unseen.

Here at last the 'day' and the 'harbour', the 'legendary fire' of the minstrels is given a personal aspect; a King. A Lord. But we don't have the King himself; he is distant and we mint a 'blurred image'. He is unseen and we but weave his emblems into 'fantastic banners'. This is no omnipresent Christ but a wholly eschatological messiah. Tolkien's point, however, is that in his absence his influence is mediated to us by myths and myth-makers. And he desires to be one of these.[88]

The twelfth and final verse in the body of the poem returns to the philosophical battlefield where Tolkien makes his final renunciation, not of the facts of modern science but of the meanings assumed therein. Such a world is 'immutable' and has no room for the possibilities of creative arts. He concludes by returning to the creation mandate, and the possibility of idolatry:

> I bow not yet before the Iron Crown,
> nor cast my own small golden sceptre down.

Tolkien refuses to relinquish the privilege or the responsibility to act as he believes he was made to act; to image the creator through creativity. Against this acceptance of the artistic task, he sets worship of the 'Iron Crown'.[89] Such worship may be despairing (as in Denethor), grudging and envious (as in Saruman) or enthusiastic (as in the Nazgul). It images a rejection of hope and faith and an acceptance of the inane and the machine.

The final verse of the poem is an epilogue of sorts; a vision of heaven as the true home of the poet, where there is no longer any fault in the making, or distortion in the seeing. The poet is situated between the 'Blessed Land' and the longed-for 'Day' himself, between a renewed heaven and earth, and the renewer. From this vantage she or he may turn from gazing upon God, to gaze upon Paradise to find God perfectly

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[88] That he does, in fact, communicate a Christian vision in his own mythological writings is now practically beyond dispute; though there remains disagreement as to the degree of his success!

[89] This crown is worn by the Satan of his own mythology, and it was plundered by the tragic hero, Beren in *The Silmarilion, (*Tolkien, *The Silmarillion,* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 217. 'Beren' is the name that Tolkien had inscribed upon his own grave-stone.

reflected there. This summarises Tolkien's beatific vision; being made in the image of the creator, we ourselves must create while we live. In that making we are inspired by God himself, and by the creation of God, in which we discover his reflection. That last point remains significant – that creation has an eschatological significance.

Throughout *Mythopoeia* Tolkien has upheld the poet as a hero, who, with every disadvantage, yet remains faithful and hopeful. The disadvantages are real and arise, as often as not, from culpable weakness, but the setting is that of a tragedy rather than that of a crime novel. Tolkien is not so interested in human guilt as he is in human faithfulness in the face of temptation and frailty. God is not cast as the judge so much as the Lord of the manor, or the father of the household ordering his affairs: 'Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys / garden nor gardener, children or their toys.'

Mythopoeia, then, moves from creation to eschaton and finds at both points validation for the human creative enterprise as the worshipful reflection of God himself. The primary means for this reflection to find expression in human life is through language, by which we realistically, if somewhat obscurely, image creation, and thereby make informed and formative 'stories'. That these might take the form of myth does not disqualify them at all, as, for Tolkien, the explanatory power of such stories far outstrips that of the scientistic myths being propagated around him.

Whilst acknowledging the possibility of error and self-deception Tolkien nevertheless affirms the validity of human values, as drawn, in some respect, from God, and as pointing towards him in faith and hope.

Interestingly the third theological virtue, charity, is missing from this poem. Whilst the values that undergird the anathemas and the benedictions therein may be seen as arising from a loving heart, this virtue does not appear to be necessary to the creative enterprise. This is in contrast to the fourth point gleaned from the *Lot*R reading with which we began and underlines the incompleteness of *Mythopoeia* as an expression of Tolkien's poetics. For a fuller picture, we should now turn to his short, analogical story, 'Leaf by Niggle'.

Before we leave 'Mythopoeia', however, I pause to mark the reference points for this newly mapped territory:

1. Language, and the language arts are the key means by which we relate to creation and creator.
2. 'Mythology' is the limit horizon of these arts.
3. This creativity arises out of our being the image and likeness of the creator which, despite the fall, continues to exist in us according to Roman Catholic theology.
4. Myth-makers, therefore, are those who, however inadequately, point us to that which is 'beyond' the inane; holding out hope of a deeper reality which can be accepted by faith.
5. Tolkien identifies himself as a myth-maker, and the eschatological Christ as the deeper reality, with myths mediating the gap.
6. Our final destination is a renewed heaven and earth within which our ongoing creativity will be faultless.

Leaf by Niggle.

From its inception this story is problematic. Tolkien's preface to it tells us that 'It has not been changed since it reached manuscript form, very swiftly, one day when I awoke with it already in mind.'[90] Thus it appears that the story arose as whole cloth as from a dream, and has had no subsequent rewriting or editing. This, from the original 'Niggle' whose insistence on getting the small details right endlessly frustrated publishers, proof-readers and typesetters,[91] is unusual. Both the lack of editing and the fact that Tolkien communicated the art-less origin of the story (rather embarrassing for an author who took considerable pride in his craft and who so thoroughly enjoyed 'origins' that he was prone to invent them for his stories where they didn't otherwise exist),[92] indicate that he thought it to be something special. There is very little indication that Tolkien enjoyed mysticism in itself, but he did employ dream communications in his stories,[93] and Catholicism has always had a strongly mystical wing. It may well be that he received this story as 'a gift';[94] an assurance that his

[90] *Tree and Leaf*, 6.
[91] See, e.g. Carpenter, 142.
[92] See e.g. in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, itself a story of word origins, as well as in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and even in the pseudo-historical notes attached to *LotR,* evoking a kind of redaction criticism.
[93] See e.g. *LotR,* 239 & 254.
[94] *Tree and Leaf,* 88.

preoccupation with myth, and especially with the mythology of his own creation, did have some value at a time when he doubted this.[95]

A second indication that this story has a somewhat unique place in the Tolkien canon is its clearly allegorical nature.

Necessary Excurses upon Allegory in Tolkien

Tolkien is on record as saying:

> I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary 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.[96]

Tolkien here clearly says that he dislikes allegory because it is a-historical. Like the *Pilgrim's Progress*, copies of which could still be found on many a mantelpiece in post-war Britain, allegory often occupies an 'empty' time and space. There is no feature of the landscape, no past or present in these imaginary worlds, other than those that have a correspondence with something else 'in the real world' – nothing exists because it is good or right in itself. This is the sort of dusty blandness that Tolkien objects to. Thus, an author who offers such an allegory is providing poor fare to the reader. Instead of the riches of 'history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the reader', the author instead presents a tract; a piece of propaganda that can only be read one way, with one meaning, and with no room for other points of view. Such allegory is despised by Tolkien.

But the quotation above is taken from the foreword to a later edition of the extremely popular *Lot*R, in which people immediately found all sorts of allegorical meanings. Patrick Curry saw in this phenomenon:

> ...a single-minded reductionism that sees everything in such a story as 'representing' something else in line with a predetermined interpretive programme… The type of literature which might be said to describe an important part

[95] Carpenter, 199.
[96] *Lot*R, xv.

> of Tolkien's work, fairy tales, has been subjected to Freudian, feminist, structuralist, Jungian, anthroposophical and Marxist interpretations in just this way. And they have frequently resulted in some real insights. But too often the price is a depressing nothing-buttery. Every other dimension of the story is ignored, while the meaning is tacitly assumed to be exhausted. The spirit-to-letter ratio of these accounts is so low that, unlike the stories themselves, they are difficult and dispiriting to read. And behind it lies a woeful blindness to the power, here and now, of the myths and folk- and fairy-tales themselves.[97]

Thus Tolkien reacts as he did above in his foreword, but also in the following excerpts from letters to readers:

> It [LotR] is not 'about' anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political.[98]
>
> …what appreciative readers have got out of the work or seen in it has seemed fair enough, even when I do not agree with it. Always excepting of course any 'interpretations' in the mode of simple allegory: that is, the particular and the topical. In a larger sense, it is I suppose impossible to write any 'story' that is not allegorical in proportion as it 'comes to life'; since each of us is an allegory, embodying in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life.[99]

The first letter quoted here reiterates and reinforces Tolkien's foreword in *LotR*, but the second adds something else; he makes clear there that various appreciative interpretations are 'fair enough' even though he may not agree with them himself provided they are not 'in the mode of simple allegory', by which he means interpretations that try to reduce the story to a single interpretation – *a la* allegory. He moderates his distaste for 'allegory' however, by using the qualifier 'simple'. Not all allegory, obviously, need be simple. He goes on to note that all stories are 'allegorical' to the degree that they 'come to life', i.e. to the degree that they have sufficient complexity and depth that they resist a simplistic

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[97] P. Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Mariner Books, 2004), 6f.
[98] *Letters,* 220.
[99] Ibid, 212.

reductionism.[100] His next statement, however, goes much further, saying that as we each embody universal truth and everlasting life in our personal histories, in ourselves we are 'allegories'! Here is life defined by art with a vengeance! Clearly Tolkien does not see allegory as an utterly invalid literary technique, but as the quintessential shape of human being; in our selves, in all our particularity, we are 'allegories' of God. Here is yet another reference to our being made in His 'image and likeness'. Thus the 'mundane' of human life points to the heights of the transcendent.

What we have here is a blurring of distinction between the concepts of allegory and analogy. Just such blurring goes on in 'Leaf by Niggle'. While it clearly has very simple allegorical elements ('Journey' = 'death')[101] it also has sufficient depth and richness, purely as a story, to be enjoyed in its own terms. Tolkien succeeds, then, according to his own criteria, despite stepping beyond his stipulation in *Beowulf*[102] where 'The large symbolism is near the surface, but it does not break through, nor become allegory.' In Niggle the symbolism does become allegorical, but it works because it arises naturally from within a lively story, sharpening its point without dulling its meaningfulness.

Just so, we might suppose, in human lives too. The 'large symbolisms' by which we really live do from time to time break the surface of life and allow themselves to be clearly seen – but in so doing do not destroy the integrity of that human life, nor reduce it to nothing other than the symbol. A Christian is more than theology, though less than God. An author is more than literature, and a gardener more than horticulture. But in each case, the 'large symbolisms' by which life is lived do define and direct life, and may be seen 'breaking the surface' of life in worship, writing, and weeding. While it clearly has allegorical elements then, as Tolkien said, 'Leaf by Niggle' 'is not properly an 'allegory' so much as 'mythical'. For Niggle is meant to be a real mixed-quality *person* and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue.'[103] Allegorical – but too rich to be simple allegory.

We must consider also that in Niggle Tolkien painted himself and his work[104] – a niggler over details, feeling inadequate to address the tasks

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[100] *Letters,*145.
[101] T. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How JRR Tolkien created a new mythology*. (Revised and Expanded Ed.) (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 43.
[102] Tolkien, 'Beowulf', 7.
[103] *Letters*, 320f.
[104] See on this point *Letters,* 113 -4, 125 – 8, 313.

before him,[105] and sacrificing most of them in order to pour himself into a single overambitious project, a 'tree'[106] which grew, put out roots and branches, obscuring and revealing an entire world, and hosting strange and glorious birds – but then needing to put all that on hold to attend to the business of life and the demands of duty.[107]

Niggle and his Leaves

What happens to this 'tree' (an analogue for 'sub-creation') is an essential point of the story, but a more important aspect is what became of the painter. The story addresses precisely that deficiency we found in 'Mythopoeia' – the absence of Charity in the creative enterprise. Here it is firstly set in opposition to the work of the myth-maker. Niggle resents every interruption of his work, but 'he could not get rid of his kind heart'. His 'kindness' (more a sense of moral duty) to the neighbour whom he cannot like and with whom he has nothing more than a boundary in common ultimately make it impossible for him to complete his creative work. He must undertake his 'journey' leaving it unfinished and largely unappreciated. This is Niggle's nadir; his tragedy is that the art that rendered his kindness cold and tardy has apparently been wasted by that kindness. He departs in confusion, as pitiful as any tramp by Beckett. Death prevents him from making good in any area. This was a real possibility for Tolkien, writing his epic in the dangerous days of World War Two. It was during this time that the story 'appeared' in his mind.[108]

What follows for Niggle, however, is a different story. Having undertaken his unwanted 'journey' he is put to hard, painful labour through which he learns to work carefully and effectively – in other words, not to 'niggle' at things. Then he is ordered to rest, before being 'rehabilitated' to another place. This is largely due to the intercession of a 'gentle' voice with a 'stern' voice. These unseen characters debate the possible merits of Niggle's work – his painting and his kindnesses. Clearly they are the Father and the Son, who are concerned here, not so much for the life of Niggle ('His heart was in the right place')[109] but the impoverished state of his soul. His few merits are not an argument for 'reward' but for the best

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[105] Carpenter, 199, Shippey, 227 f.
[106] *Letters,* 321.
[107] Tolkien's letters to his son (*Letters,* 69ff) are replete with his frustrations.
[108] *Letters* 252.
[109] *Tree and Leaf*, 85.

'treatment' of that poverty. This treatment is felt to be exceedingly gracious – 'a load of rich gifts and the summons to a King's feast'.[110] The biblical metaphors here point directly to the experience of grace overtaking works. Though Tolkien is not writing for Protestant sensitivities over the relation between grace and works, they need not be concerned at this point for however he emphasises the importance of works, he does not make them determinative.

The 'other place' to which Niggle is sent for continued 'treatment' is an otherwise unoccupied, but oddly recognisable piece of countryside, at the centre of which he discovers… his tree! The tree that he had spent his life creating, here lifted from paint and made real. He spreads his arms wide and exclaims 'It is a gift!'[111] He has been moved from purgatory to paradise.[112]

He discovers that the countryside around him (also from his painting) needs completion, and as he examines what remains to be done, he wishes his neighbour, with his gardening abilities, could be there with him – and shortly he is. The two of them complete the task, learning from and enjoying each other as they do so.

The eschaton for mythmakers; Faith, Hope, *and* Charity

Tolkien here claims for human 'sub-creation' an eternal significance; the possibility that our creative works will be redeemed with us, and that heaven (with its purgatorial aspects) will give us the opportunity to realise our gifts in all their fullness. As in the last verse of 'Mythopoeia' 'Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys / Garden nor gardener, children or their toys.' Here are Tolkien's poets with faultless fingers on their harps. This is his hope, and the faith which makes hopeful art possible. But Tolkien's vision is richly biblical, and therefore richly realistic. Thus he carefully depicts both the tension between love and art and the necessity for them to come together for anything of eternal significance to be created.

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[110] *Tree and Leaf*, 86.
[111] *Tree and Leaf*, 88.
[112] *Letters*, 111.

The relation between Heaven and Earth

Examining this concept of eternally significant 'subcreation' reveals that Tolkien saw a direct continuity between creation and recreation; that which in a more naïve theology might be called 'Earth' and 'Heaven'. Tolkien's more complex and biblical vision is one of the renewing of the whole of creation (heaven *and* earth) and within that the redeeming of humanity and human works; thus he describes the incorporation of Niggle's art into the landscape of paradise as being 'taken up into *Creation*'.[113] Creation, as belonging to God and as having an eternal significance, is an essential category for Tolkien. Human beings are related to both creation and creator; we are created, and in the likeness of the creator. Therefore it is in our own creative activity that those relationships become effective and enjoyable. Art – such as myth-making – relates us to our whole environment, the material and the spiritual; the created and the creator.

Our excursion to 'Niggle's Parish' has given us a new set of references for our literary/theological map-making, but they substantially coincide with the previous bearings. In exploring 'Leaf by Niggle' we find that:

1. Art should follow the richness of creation - as it is reflected in the richness of mythology – rather than the oversimplifications of ideology – as reflected in simplistic analogy.
2. Human life in itself is an 'allegory' or analogy of the creator.
3. Tolkien, again, is exploring the issues raised by his own identity as a mythmaker.
4. A core issue is the tension between faith-and-hope oriented artistic creativity and the demands of human relationships. Tolkien concludes that it is essential to the creative task that the duties of charity are discharged and the delights of *koinonia* thus learned.
5. Tolkien looks forward to an eschaton in which artist and art are purified together and given a place in paradise.
6. This paradise is in direct continuity with the creation that already subsists. It is on this ground that Tolkien hopes to find that human sub-creation also continues to the extent to which it arises from the same source as original creation.

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[113] *Letters,* 195 (italics mine).

Thus, in these three imaginative works – the epic *Lord of the Rings,* the poem *Mythopoeia,* and the short story *Leaf by Niggle*, we discover that Tolkien wove a great many ideas and convictions about the role of poesis. Although the essay *On Fairy Stories* is his best-known defence of his literary/theological views, those same views find their most compelling expression in the form most appropriate to them. The defence of poesis, and especially poesis as worship, is best carried out by the myth-maker at his art:

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time…

Roger Driver-Burgess
Thames Baptist Church