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J. R. R. TOLKIEN, CATHOLIC NOVELIST

"I take my models, like anyone else—from such 'life' as I know."
J. R. R. TOLKIEN, 1956, letter to Michael Straight.¹

"The subject of my fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." FLANNERY O'CONNOR²

"[T]he monsters do not depart whether the gods go or come. A Christian was (and is) still, like his forefathers, a mortal hemmed in a hostile world." J. R. R. TOLKIEN³

BEFORE ARGUING Tolkien's status as a Catholic novelist, it makes sense to define the category. What might a Catholic novelist be? For my purposes, Flannery O'Connor provides guidance in two essays from *Mystery and Manners*. A Catholic novelist is not an apologist, because an apologist is not a novelist. A Catholic writer is not an evangelist, because novels are not concerned with evangelization, and a Catholic novelist is not necessarily one who tells Christian tales in allegorical form. A Catholic novelist is a writer who sees the world from a Catholic perspective:

What we roughly call the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it

¹ *Letters*, 235.

² Flannery O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), 118.

³ *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 22.

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is one in which truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by.⁴

The novelist is required to create the illusion of a whole world with believable people in it, and the chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn't mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater.⁵

O'Connor's point is that, unless the natural world is portrayed exactly, the supernatural's part in it will be all the more obscure. Nature and super-nature are not opposed to each other, neither is there a distinct boundary between them; rather, they are different aspects of a unified whole. If, as Psalm 19 proclaims, the heavens declare the glory of God, then that glory can only be obscured by a sloppy portrayal. The Catholic universe is not Gnostic, but incarnational, and God is not only transcendent, but immanent.

Tolkien often demonstrates this immanence in painstakingly detailed landscape description, and his work must be read at a walking pace to appreciate its beauty. One of his most illustrative passages occurs at the end of "Journey to the Cross-Roads," where Frodo and Sam see the beheaded statue of the king:

Standing there for a moment filled with dread Frodo became aware that a light was shining; he saw it glowing on Sam's face beside him. Turning towards it, he saw, beyond an arch of boughs, the road to Osgiliath running almost as straight as a stretched ribbon down, down, into the West. . . .

Frodo and Sam then see the statue, its head knocked off and a rough-hewn stone with the Eye of Sauron painted on, set on the king's shoulders in mockery. Yet, as the light continues to shine from the setting sun, they find the real head of the statue:

Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king's head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. 'Look, Sam!' he

4 O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists," in *Mystery and Manners*, 173.

5 *Ibid.*, 175.

cried, startled into speech. 'Look! The king has got a crown again!'

The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

'They cannot conquer for ever!' said Frodo. And then suddenly the brief glimpse was gone. (702)⁶

Tolkien has captured a fleeting epiphany on the doorstep of Mordor: grace in territory held largely by the devil. The Orcs' mockery of the king echoes the mockery of Christ during his passion, while the coronal of flowers suggests Easter hope replacing the crown of thorns. It is also a prophetic indicator of Aragorn's return as King. The vision of light on the flowered king stirs Frodo. Grace gives him courage. Sauron cannot conquer forever. There is no Christian table-thumping in this description, but a vision of reality rich with Christian association and one that encourages Christian reflection.

The obligation to portray the natural vividly is greater for a Catholic novelist, as O'Connor says, because it is through the natural that the action of grace—divine aid—is discerned; and it is in nature that the supernatural comfortably resides. Tolkien is scrupulous in his portrayal of nature; he makes the reader feel that the soil of the Shire and the trees of Lothlórien are full of grace. This understanding that the supernatural and natural are bound-up and in harmony with each other grounds the Catholic understanding that the world is sacramental—a fount of grace. O'Connor explains:

The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth.⁷

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary, One Vol. Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005). All page references, usually indicated in parenthesis, are from this source.

⁷ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," *Mystery and Manners*, 152.

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Every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses.⁸

Open and free observation is founded on our ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful, as the Church teaches.⁹

The Catholic vision is that the holy is not located outside a material universe that is corrupt, but within a material universe that is mainly good, though fallen, and this means that holiness can enter through the senses and that the world at large has a sacramental quality. Christianity makes spiritual goods out of the most mundane material: bread, water, wine, oil; everything is meaningful. O'Connor says this way of seeing is so *habitual* a part of the Catholic mind-set, that it works unconsciously:

The tensions of being a Catholic novelist are probably never balanced for the writer until the Church becomes so much a part of his personality that he can forget about her—in the sense that, when he writes, he forgets about himself.¹⁰

O'Connor's main point, that a Catholic novelist sees a world illuminated by the light of Catholic culture and thought—more specifically, by commitment to Christ—is the important one, but, although this illumination may touch everything, it may not establish itself in symbols or action readily identifiable as Christian. A Catholic novel, like Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* or O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, may not look Catholic on its face. One deals with a small time thug in Brighton, the other with an atheist evangelist in the Protestant South. Both, however, bring a supernatural reality into the novel by assuming a universe meaningful in Catholic terms. O'Connor has one important addition in her essay, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction": *all* fiction writers need an anagogical vision, "the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation."¹¹

8 O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists," 176.

9 Ibid., 178.

10 Ibid., 181.

11 Ibid., 72.

Anagogical vision goes hand in hand with having a “sacramental view” of life, for the sacramentality of the world is apprehended through such vision. Fr. Andrew Greeley describes a general Catholic imagination, into which O’Connor’s view of Catholic novelists neatly fits:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace. . . .

This special Catholic imagination can appropriately be called sacramental. It sees created reality as a “sacrament,” that is, a revelation of the presence of God. The workings of this imagination are most obvious in the Church’s seven sacraments, but the seven are both a result and a reinforcement of a much broader Catholic view of reality.¹²

The sources in patristic and medieval literature for this sacramental view of Creation are so extensive that they defy any complete listing. The understanding of the created world as in itself sacramental was a pervasive one, biblically based on Romans 1:20, Wisdom 13:1–9, Psalm 148 and Daniel 3:57–81. Among the people who explicate it are Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Ephrem, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine, John Scotus Eriugena, Pseudo-Dionysius, Hildegard of Bingen, Alan of Lille, Hugh of St. Victor, St. Francis, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Saint Gregory of Palmas, and as a group, Celtic monastics and the desert fathers.¹³ This tradition continues to this day through the works

12 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–2.

13 See, for a sampling, Saint Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1991), 2.2.5. 1–5, 160; Saint Athanasius, *Contra gentes*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 35, 95–97; Saint Syrus Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginitly and the Symbols of the Lord*, in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (NY: Paulist Press, 1989) and Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock

of spiritual writers such as John of the Cross, Thomas Traherne, and, as already cited, Gerard Manley Hopkins;¹⁴ I am not the first to see its connection to Tolkien.¹⁵

The Logos and the Sacramental Universe in Tolkien's Life and Writing

T. S. Eliot asserted that one of the characteristics of being human in the modern world was the “dissociation of sensibility,” i.e., the separation of thought from feeling. This dissociation produces “the wasteland” of modernity, where thinking, turned loose on

(Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998); Basil of Caesarea, *On the Hexaemeron*, in *Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way, Fathers of the Church 46 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 3–150, esp. homily 1.7, 112; Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 81–82, 105; John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* (The Division of Nature), trans. I. P. Sheldon-Williams; rev. John J. O'Meara (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987); Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid; notes and trans. collaboration by Paul Rorem; introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean LeClerq, and Karlfried Froehlich (NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 4.1–10, 71–80; Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, ed. Matthew Fox and trans. Robert Cunningham (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1987) vision 1.2.8, 10–11, and 2:15, 36; Wanda Cizewski, “Reading the World as Scripture: Hugh of St. Victor's *De Tribus Diebus*,” *Florilegium* 9 (1987): 65–88; Adam of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980); Saint Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God* (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*), *Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Ewert Cousins (NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 59–68; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.92, 2.1–3, 2.39, 3.112, 3.113, 3.64, 3.69, 3.144.10, 3.145, and *Summa Theologiae* 1.15.2, 1.47.1, 22.1–2, 3.60. 2, 3.60.4; St. Gregory of Palmas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff; trans. Nicholas Gendle (NY: Paulist Press, 1983).

14 Saint John of the Cross, “The Spiritual Canticle,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1973), par. 25, 472–73; Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation* (Cosimo Classics, 2007); virtually all of Hopkins's poetry. For additional sources, see Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic & Medieval Concepts* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

15 For instance, Joseph Pearce, in *Tolkien, Man and Myth*, argues that “Tolkien succeeds in synthesizing the physical with the metaphysical in a way which

its own, runs an insane course, without brake from feeling or intuition or faith, and where feeling is likewise unguided by reason.¹⁶ Tolkien understood this problem very well; indeed, Saruman is its exemplar and Mordor its terminus. The sacraments, in which the natural and spiritual world become one, are the antithesis of modern dissociation.

There are seven established sacraments of the Catholic Church; in addition, the Church itself is considered a sacrament. Surrounding these is the larger sacramentality of life in a universe that speaks of God, because it was made by God. The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines "sacraments" as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ, by which divine life is dispensed to us." The sacraments are celebrated in "visible rites" that "make present the graces proper to each sacrament" and, "They bear fruit in those who receive them with the

marks him as a mystic" (97); Bradley Birzer, in *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, writes that, for Tolkien, the world of fairy "offered a glimpse of the way in which sacrament and liturgy infuse the natural law and the natural order" (xx); Kath Filmer, "An Allegory Unveiled: A Reading of *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* 13.4, 50 (1987): 19–21; Robert Murray, "A Tribute of Tolkien," *Tablet*, September 15, 1973, reprinted in Ian Boyd and Stratford Caldecott, eds. *A Hidden Presence: The Catholic Imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Seton Hall, NJ: Chesterton Press, 2003); C.N. Sue Abromaitis, "The Distant Mirror of Middle-Earth: The Sacramental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien," in *The Catholic Imagination*, ed. Kenneth D. Whitehead (Southbend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003), 56–73. In "J.R.R. Tolkien: Lover of the Logos," *Communio* 20 (Spring, 1993) 85–106, Mark Sebanc recognizes the central importance of the Logos in *The Lord of the Rings*, noting "the eternal Maker is incarnately manifest in Tolkien's work through his sub-creator's own deeply informed Christian piety, which evinces a humble outlook on a universe irradiated by an indwelling lumen increatum. LOTR is distinctive in its minute and sacramental regard for mundane particulars" (95).

16 Walker Percy presents an amusing look at the divide between "angelism" and "bestialism" in his novel, *Love in the Ruins*, in which the hero psychiatrist, Tom Moore, measures the extent of this modern schizoid condition with his "lapsometer." On the problems of disconnecting faith from reason, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), especially Chapter 2, "Faith, Religion, and Culture."

required dispositions.”¹⁷ The seven distinct sacraments recognized by the Church are baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, ordination, anointing of the sick, and marriage. The graces conveyed by each sacrament, no matter how specific to an occasion, all serve the same function of uniting the partaker in a living and transformative union with Christ.

We almost¹⁸ never see anything like a religion in Middle-earth, let alone explicitly celebrated sacraments, so how do sacraments get into Tolkien's ancient world? The most basic fact of a created universe is that, as an artifact, it directs our attention back to its Creator and, in so doing, becomes an “efficacious” dispenser of grace.¹⁹ Made by God, the universe cannot avoid being sacramental; it *must* refer to the glory of its Maker. De Caussade eloquently sets forth the principle:

By our senses we can see only the action of the creature, but faith sees the creator acting in all things. Faith sees that Jesus Christ lives in everything and works through all history to the end of time, that every fraction of a second, every atom of matter, contains a fragment of his hidden life and his secret activity. The actions of created beings are veils which hide the profound mysteries of the working of God.²⁰

Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth, as his letters testify, was faith-filled. He was enough of a Romantic—particularly of a Coleridgean temper—to accept the inspirational power of nature, and his fiction is steeped in it. Tolkien read Hopkins, who presents the point neatly: “The world is charged with the grandeur

17 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), no. 1131, 293.

18 The exception is the prayer-like ceremony of Faramir and his men in “The Window on the West,” *The Lord of the Rings*, 676.

19 The literature on the sacramental nature of the world is vast, and, as the current revival of interest in the early church fathers gains ground, it will grow. Good places to begin reading are Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) and Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).

20 Jean Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (NY: Image, Books, 1975), 36.

of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It grows to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed."²¹ The world, Hopkins proclaims, oozes sacramental oil and has the potential to anoint us. Even if we lose sight of this reality, the fact is, "nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things," and the Holy Ghost continues its creative brooding over the world "with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." One merely has to pay attention to it, as do the Elves, and some Men and Hobbits, to get the benefit of that grace.

The assumption of sacramentality is everywhere in Tolkien's descriptions of nature. The Shire, Rivendell, and Lothlórien, the caves of Helmsdeep, and Fangorn Forest ooze sacramental oil. Tolkien's ecological models are medieval, based on a well-organized and hierarchical structure in the universe in which all creatures have both an inherent value, in that they are divine artifacts that tell us something about the Creator, and have an instrumental value in serving the rest of creation. There is nothing wrong with the food chain, and Tolkien's characters are not vegans—Sam likes his fish and chips and stewed rabbit—but his good characters respect the world rather than seeing it as a "standing reserve" to be mined for their own pleasure. Aragorn tells Frodo he has some skill as a hunter "at need" (190), but first he mentions berries, roots, and herbs. Each individual component of the world has sacramental value, since it mediates the presence of God, and all the components working together make a powerful statement. The world must be respected as God's text.

Tolkien's sacramental orientation can be discerned in a passage that even critics who appreciate Tolkien have found to be generically out of place, more suited for children's fiction than *The Lord of the Rings*. In this passage, early in the book, we see Frodo, Sam and Pippin under observation by a curious fox with a full agenda:

A fox passing through the wood on business of his own stopped several minutes and sniffed.

'Hobbits!' he thought. 'Well, what next? . . . There's some-

21 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 27.

thing mighty queer behind this.' He was quite right, but he never found out any more about it. (72)

What is Tolkien's point? Simply that the fox was *on business of his own*. Not everything in the world is centered on the problem of the Ring. Though creatures are interdependent, they are also independent. They have their own value and their own agendas. It is just on this basis that the Rangers, unknown to the residents of the Shire, have been protecting the Hobbits for years. The fox's dignity and independence as a creature suggest an entire ethic of stewardship.

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Tolkien does not merely present a generally sacramental Middle-earth, but gives us a world in which many of the seven sacraments are replicated as a continuing pattern in the lives of his characters. Tolkien believes in a reality designed to bring these sacraments forth—to “ooze oil”—even in a pre-Christian society. Events very much like baptisms occur; life for the heroes assumes a Eucharistic pattern; there are penance, confirmation, healing, and marriage. Sacraments flowing out of the natural courses of human life move the souls of Tolkien's characters toward Eru Ilúvatar—God.

This does not mean that Tolkien ever presents Church sacraments as sacraments proper or in thinly disguised allegories. Tolkien sees the imposition of allegory as an infringement of the reader's interpretive freedom, explicitly recognizing this in his “Foreword to the Second Edition” of *The Lord of the Rings*:

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. (emphasis added; xxiv)

Here, the freedom of the reader comes into play, accommodating an applicability that can be sustained by the text, even if not man-

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dated by it. Tolkien's intention, in part, is to give the reader this freedom, and, as he says in his prologue, it is not his intention to determine outcomes. "If you want to apply Sauron and the Ring to the Cold War and see Stalin and the H-Bomb, more power to you," Tolkien might say. "Just don't imagine that I want you to limit the meaning of my book to that association. I'm not Edmund Spenser." (By the way, Tolkien would have thought an exclusively Cold War reading an impoverished production.)

Yet, the word "allegory" cannot be so neatly dismissed, despite Tolkien's proclamation of distaste for it, for he is not nearly so dismissive in his letters. Tolkien tells Milton Waldman, probably in 1951:

I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional allegory—yet any attempt to explain the purport of my myth or fairytale must use allegorical language. (And of course, the more 'life' a story has, the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made, the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story.)²²

The word, "life," in this quotation refers to more than verisimilitude, though it certainly means that. Tolkien is acknowledging a good story's potential to generate multiple interpretations which can only be set forth in allegorical language. A story with "life" is, for its readers, continually suggestive, a fountain of meanings. The point for the writer is not to get in the way of larger significance by forcing an artificially restrictive allegory on the reader.

In a 1947 letter to Stanley Unwin, Tolkien provides more nuance:

There is a 'moral,' I suppose, in any tale worth telling. . . . Allegory and story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is, the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is, the more easily can *those so minded* find allegory in it.²³ (my italics)

²² *Letters*, 145.

²³ *Ibid.*, 121.

To understand this from a generic perspective, we can say that Tolkien firmly moves us away from allegorical interpretation toward the symbolic. Here, his predecessors are the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge and the late Victorian, Hopkins, but also Modernists, like Eliot and Waugh. Tolkien acknowledges, in his pre-publication letter to Robert Murray that *The Lord of the Rings* contains symbolism with Catholic content (p.43). A symbol refers to a reality greater than itself, but participates as a constituent of that reality; it does not have neat boundaries, but points toward what cannot be expressed in language. As J. Robert Barth explains, allegory and metaphor lead to a literature of reference, while symbol leads to a literature of encounter.²⁴ A sacrament is a particular kind of symbol, referring to and participating in a divine reality greater than itself. Tolkien's work, like that of Coleridge and Hopkins, aspires not just to symbolic, but to specifically sacramental meaning and, hence, to encounter with a pre-modern, God-filled world.

At the risk of putting words in Tolkien's mouth, I believe he is saying that symbolic writing yields a range of allegorical interpretation. While a deliberately constructed allegory ought to yield just one explicit decoding by a knowledgeable reader, a symbol, by its very nature, cannot be so restricted. Yet, the interpretation of a symbol must use the language of allegory; it must say this means that—among other things. Tolkien's friend, C.S. Lewis, lucidly explains the distinction, and relationship, between allegory and symbol in his book, *The Allegory of Love*:

It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms. . . . This fundamental equivalence between the immaterial and the material may be used by the mind in two ways. . . . On the one hand you can start with an immaterial fact, such as the passions which you actually experience, and can then invent *visibilia* to express them. If you are hesitating between an angry retort and a soft answer, you can express your state of mind by inventing a person called Ira with a torch and letting her contend with

²⁴ J. Robert Barth, S.J., *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge & The Romantic Tradition* 2nd Ed. (NY: Fordham University Press, 2001).

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another invented person called Patientia. This is allegory. . . . But there is another way of using the equivalence, which is almost the opposite of allegory, and which I would call sacramentalism or symbolism. If our passions, being immaterial, can be copied by material inventions, then it is possible that our material world in its turn is the copy of an invisible world. . . . The attempt to read that something else through sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism.²⁵

Now, the symbolic or sacramental text is certainly what Tolkien wants to create—a text with “life,” which he acknowledges can only be discussed in “allegorical language,” but is not itself allegorical, because it refers to and participates in a reality greater than itself. It does not take an idea and then invent a material reality to express it, but works through the material to represent a greater truth. “Real life” is allegorical to Tolkien, because, in the Augustinian tradition, real life has a meaning beyond itself. The objects of creation point to their creator: the physical universe itself is a collection of signs which have meaning.²⁶ As a narrative, the ordinary human life figures forth the master-narrative of salvation history. Augustine’s autobiography, *The Confessions*, shows him reading the meaning of his own life in exactly this way.

Tolkien does not offer allegories of sacraments—but rather a novel which contains and illustrates sacramental truth. By recontextualizing the sacraments in a romantic quest, Tolkien helps us to *recover* their meaning, recovery being one of the functions of fairy-story. Tolkien will use character, plot, and scene to get at the truth that underlies sacraments, by showing how such truth manifests itself in Middle-earth. Now, of course, sacraments themselves are symbols that point at a deep, underlying truth. Moreover, they are sufficient symbols, instituted by Christ himself, using the right signs (bread, wine, water, oil) not only to convey a spiritual reality, but to confer grace. Tolkien does not try to

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (NY: 1958), 44–45.

²⁶ The locus classicus is St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*.

trump Christ with substitutes. Events with baptismal significance (see chapter 5), while not baptisms, will contain enough of the elements of baptism to indicate the connection. *Lembas*, while not having the communion significance of Christ's body, will have some of the efficacy of a communion wafer by empowering Frodo and Sam and nearly choking Gollum, who is in a state of mortal sin (see Chapter 10). The signs will be the similar and the effects will be similar, because Tolkien's intention is to create a sacramental world, interpretable as such. He does this to tell us the truth about our own world.



Critics who dismiss the Christian influence in Tolkien's work seem to believe it can only occur as crude allegory. But this is absent. As Verlyn Flieger notes, "there is in Tolkien's mythology no explicit Christ episode (though the reappearance of Gandalf comes close) such as the sacrificial death and resurrection of Aslan in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*."²⁷ In his long letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien explains that his work reflects and contains "in solution . . . elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world."²⁸ But Tolkien's "solution" becomes so super-saturated with the Catholic vision that, at times, crystals begin to form, and a certain quality we might call "grace" enters the page. It is with this less strident quality of Christian influence that this book is concerned.

By keeping Christian truth "in solution," Tolkien conveyed truth in the manner of all myth, not in a ham-fisted or transparently allegorical statement, but "incarnate" in events and their surroundings. As he explains in his essay on *Beowulf*: "The significance of myth is not to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who *feels* rather than makes explicit what the theme portends, who presents it

²⁷ Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), xxi.

²⁸ *Letters*, 144.

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incarnate in a world of history and geography.”²⁹ If Tolkien has done his job well, his work will not shout out “sacramental influence,” but will yet contain it in suggestion, nuance, and a particular kind of energy that a sacramental sensibility apprehends or, as Tolkien says, “feels.” Tolkien said, “myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected.” Reading Tolkien well requires not dissection, but sensitivity to symbol and allusion.

Some of the critical skepticism about Christian influence in Tolkien’s work arises from simple ignorance of Christianity. For instance, Patrick Curry, in *Defending Middle-earth*, argues that Tolkien was better than his Catholicism in embracing a pagan, “grace-filled” view of the world. Paganism, he maintains, in contrast to Catholicism, is an ecological spirituality,³⁰ and so Tolkien provides us just what we need, as the world confronts the problems of industrial pollution. It is not modernity that has “disenchanted the world,” but Christianity, which underlies the current “social, ecological, and spiritual crisis.”³¹ Whereas “the principal thrust of institutionalized Christian tradition is the license to exploit nature,”³² based on belief in a God who is outside of nature, Tolkien’s paganism recovers nature. To theologize this, Curry argues that Catholicism desacralizes the world, and so Tolkien must have looked to paganism for succor. This gets everything backwards. Catholicism has always recognized an immanent God as well as a transcendent one, as St. Francis, Gerard Manley Hopkins, G.K. Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc were well aware. Curry simply is unaware of, or has ignored, the immense patristic and medieval part of the Catholic tradition and the way it continued. Flannery O’Connor, who saw the world from inside the Church, sees the consciousness of sacramentality in the world as the very mark of a Catholic novelist. That some

²⁹ *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 15, my emphasis.

³⁰ Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth. Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 108

³¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³² *Ibid.*, 109. Even Curry acknowledges the existence of St. Francis, but seems to see him as an aberration.

pagan beliefs about God's close relation to the world would line up with Catholic beliefs was no surprise to Tolkien, who would have been horrified, nonetheless, to have *The Lord of the Rings* enlisted as part of the New Age bromide about why traditional Christianity needs to be replaced by an ecologically sensitive paganism.³³

There are few critics who hold Tolkien can be purged of Christianity entirely. Ronald Hutton, in his essay, "The Pagan Tolkien,"³⁴ comes close, but even his argument is mainly limited to Tolkien's work in the 1920s on his legendarium. Initially, Hutton cites Flieger in support of the proposition that Tolkien was severely split between belief and unbelief in his own Catholic life, implying that this diminishes the influence of Catholicism in his work, but this distorts Tolkien's biography, and Flieger is not a strong ally. In *Splintered Light*, Flieger initially portrays Tolkien as a man of great contradictions, split between Christian hope and the pessimism of Germanic myth. Yet Christianity doesn't expect a heaven on earth—not until God brings history to an end and recreates the world. Until then, looking forward to "the long defeat" within history was typical Catholic thinking in Tolkien's day;³⁵ his Christianity and his use of Germanic myth support each other powerfully with regard to man's lot in this world.

Flieger quotes two of Tolkien's letters³⁶ in opposition to each other, to illustrate the religiously-conflicted Tolkien. The first (quoted at length near the end of this chapter) is to Christopher Tolkien. It is a mystical vision that Tolkien had himself, comparing guardian angels to beams of God's attention. In contrast, Flieger cites a short phrase from a letter to Michael Tolkien: "[if] there is a God. . . ." I have not been able to find this sentence fragment in Tolkien's letters, and Flieger provides no citation. My

33 See *Letters*, 412, in which he worries that *The Lord of the Rings* will become "a soil in which the fungus-growth of cults is likely to arise," for Americans with ecological concerns. The letter is written in 1972.

34 Ronald Hutton, "The Pagan Tolkien," in *The Ring and the Cross*, 57–70.

35 *Letters*, 255. "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat.'"

36 Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 1.

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best guess is that she is paraphrasing part of the letter to Michael Tolkien that addresses Michael's disappointments with the Catholic Church and the importance of taking Holy Communion. Let us consider a fuller citation:

*If He is a fraud and the Gospels fraudulent—that is: garbled accounts of a demented megalomaniac (which is the only alternative), then of course the spectacle exhibited by the Church . . . in history and today is simply evidence of a gigantic fraud. If not, however, then this spectacle is alas! only what was to be expected: it began before the first Easter, and it does not affect faith at all. . . . (my emphasis)*³⁷

Tolkien then spends the rest of the letter counseling his son as a pastor would, defending the Catholic faith while acknowledging its very imperfect Church, often an unfortunate “spectacle,” which began in Peter's denials of Christ and Jesus' disciples running for their lives. Tolkien only put up the “if” clause to reject it. Even Flieger finally acknowledges that her split between Tolkien's “optimism” and “pessimism” can be explained in terms of standard Christian theology, making one wonder why she bothered asserting an antithesis: “But a Christian acceptance of the Fall leads inevitably to the idea that imperfection is the state of things in this world and that human actions, however hopeful, cannot rise above that imperfection.”³⁸ (We shall see in the next chapter how despair and hope are resolved in Tolkien's thoroughly Christian concept of *euclastrophe*.)

On the basis of this one letter to Michael, Hutton argues that Tolkien's “religious faith was not a robust and untroubled one, but subject to doubt and losses of confidence.”³⁹ In another part of the letter to Michael, Tolkien says, “Out of wickedness and sloth I *almost* ceased to practice my religion—especially at Leeds,

³⁷ *Letters*, 338.

³⁸ Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 4.

³⁹ Hutton, 59. Of course, the condition of faith in a secular age is that it will always be held amid doubt, as Charles Taylor argues. See *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–22. Doubt is not the antithesis of faith, but one of its modern components. Faith, as Tolkien recognized in his letter to Michael, is mainly fidelity despite doubt.

and at 22 Northmoor Road” (my emphasis).⁴⁰ What “almost” means to a man who, at the time of writing this letter, went to communion daily is not so easy to say. Only going twice a week? Hutton has nothing to offer but Tolkien’s own assessment of his faith at this point, and this from a man who for most of his life had a very high commitment and was likely to be hard on himself. It is the flimsiest of evidence for lack of a “robust” religious life. But even if Tolkien had stopped going to mass for an entire decade and then come back, it would not mean much. Ups and downs were part of Mother Teresa’s religious life as well. They are the bread and butter of the Catholic life and are to be expected, as Tolkien also explains in the letter:

[T]he act of will of faith is not a single moment of final decision: it is a permanent indefinitely repeated act › state which must go on—so we pray for ‘final perseverance’. The temptation to unbelief (which really means rejection of Our Lord and His claims) is always there within us.⁴¹

Even Hutton acknowledges that this lapse seems only to have affected Tolkien’s initial work on his *legendarium*, but not the final product, which had nearly forty more years of work to go before *The Silmarillion* was published. (And needless to say, one could be quite a wavering Catholic and still have significant Catholic influence in one’s writing, Graham Greene being an example.)

Hutton’s tone deafness about Catholic practice and belief is striking. Despite the importance of Frodo’s attempts to forgive Gollum and the great reward of that forgiveness at the end, when Gollum takes the Ring (albeit along with Frodo’s finger) into the volcanic fire, Hutton argues that the emphasis on forgiveness in *The Lord of the Rings* does not support Christian influence, because in Tolkien’s story forgiveness does not work: i.e., “Gollum . . . fits the usual dismal pattern of repaying mercy with ultimate treachery—and so reinforces the argument that forgiving enemies never redeems them.”⁴² But what Catholic theologian ever said that

40 *Letters*, 340.

41 *Ibid.*, 338.

42 Hutton, 67.

human forgiveness *did* redeem the forgiven? In this instance, Hutton simply displays his unfamiliarity with basic Christian dogma. If I do forgive a man who has destroyed something or someone I love, it may have much more to do with my sanctification than his, just as Bilbo's decision not to take Gollum's life makes his custody of the Ring less spiritually damaging. Forgiveness is good for the forgiver, as it is for Frodo, who is saved by Gollum from captivity to the Ring; it may also be very good for the forgiven, as in the cases of Boromir and Galadriel. But a person who is forgiven by another is not magically transformed or redeemed according to any Catholic theology.

Hutton looks for explicit disavowals of Catholic influence in Tolkien's letters and paraphrases his 1958 letter to Rhona Beare as follows: "he . . . suggested . . . that his Catholicism could not in fact be deduced from his books."⁴³ But here is the verbatim quotation from the letter: "I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The latter 'fact' *perhaps* cannot be deduced. . . ."⁴⁴ Tolkien actually embraces Beare's deduction of Christian influence, and that "perhaps" certainly does not rule out a deduction of Roman Catholicism—to my ear, it does rather the reverse, suggesting Catholicism is in the book, easily deducible or not. Finally, Hutton himself admits Christian content in Tolkien's work: "Tolkien's supreme being, Ilúvatar . . . is in personality very much a Christian God."⁴⁵ Speaking of *The Silmarillion*, Hutton notes, "The result is a coherent and harmonious Christian Neoplatonism."⁴⁶

Again, the problem seems to be that Hutton is looking for precise allegorical representations of Christian stories, practices, or beliefs. We will not find anything that crude. But, I believe, we will see the sacramental understanding of the world which Flannery O'Connor identifies as the most distinctive quality of the Catholic novelist. This is part of the distinct flavor in the *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* which makes them what they are.

43 *Ibid.*, 59.

44 *Letters*, 288, my emphasis.

45 Hutton, 62.

46 *Ibid.*, 65.

A sensitive reader tastes it, even if she cannot put a name to the taste.



The temptation to interpret one's work, especially when readers are not "getting it" and are asking for help, must have been intense for a literature professor whose *raison d'être* is furthering the understanding of literary texts. When people wrote letters to Tolkien, expressing an interpretation that delighted him, he had no compunctions about ruling it in bounds, sometimes with enthusiasm and sometimes with restraint. When they wrote letters to him, and he clearly believed they had gone wrong or needed a suggestion to go right, he also responded, sometimes with restraint and sometimes with amazingly lengthy and forthcoming letters. This may seem to contradict his "Foreword to the Second Edition," where he also says of *The Lord of the Rings*, "As for any inner meaning or 'message', it has in the intention of the author none" (xxiii). Now, in one sense, this is true of all good novels. The message is not "inner," as if the novel were a nut that needed cracking—the message is the entire novel itself. "Inner" is the problem word for Tolkien, but that he had a message is made quite explicit in his letters. Let us see what some of them have to say about Catholicism's impact on his imagination and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien's letters reveal a writer who used Christian concepts not only as commonplaces for the construction of fictional reality, but as ideas through which he understood his own life. The most direct letter authorizing a Catholic reading of *The Lord of the Rings* is to Robert Murray, S. J., in which Tolkien simply declares the work to be fundamentally Catholic. Murray, I suspect, has brought up the question of Marian influence on Tolkien's creation of Galadriel and perhaps an association of Galadriel with grace. Tolkien replies:

I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at

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first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.⁴⁷

This is perhaps enough to establish that looking for a Christian and more specifically Catholic subtext in *The Lord of the Rings* is not only legitimate, but the very thing which Tolkien's letters, if not Tolkien himself, would goad a reader to do.

Tolkien's response to Murray raises many questions: "A fundamentally religious and Catholic work"? What does "fundamentally" mean to Tolkien? How is the Catholic element "absorbed into the story itself and the symbolism"? When he says that the book was unconsciously Catholic at first, but consciously so in revision, what does that imply? (Remember O'Connor's comment that, for a Catholic writer, the Church becomes "so much a part of his personality" that he forgets about her in the writing.) In what sense does cutting out "religion" as an element of his imaginary world allow its fundamental Catholicism more potency?

We get some clues as to how this "Catholic imagination" might inform *The Lord of the Rings* in a 1958 letter to Deborah Webster, who inquired about Tolkien's life and its relevance to the book. Tolkien first says that he doesn't like biographical criticism, because it only distracts attention from the author's works and because "only one's guardian Angel, or indeed God Himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author's works." Yet, a distinction can be made between biographical facts and *beliefs*, especially those that might provide models, as the rest of the letter suggests:

[M]ore important, I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The later 'fact' perhaps cannot be deduced; though one critic (by letter) asserted that the invocations of Elbereth, and the character of Galadriel as directly described (or through the words of Gimli and Sam) were clearly related to Catholic devotion to Mary. Another saw in waybread (*lembas*) = viaticum and the reference

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 172.

to its feeding the *will* (vol. III, 213) and being more potent when fasting, a derivation from the Eucharist. (That is: far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy-story.)⁴⁸

Tolkien clearly believes that Christianity is in his stories to be deduced, and, although he says Roman Catholicism “perhaps” cannot be deduced, he cites two correspondents who have deduced it. The letter writer who found Marian influence in Elbereth and Galadriel may be Fr. Murray, of the previous letter. Tolkien provides us with interpretive clues about how to read him, when he discusses *lembas* as being like a communion wafer because of its Eucharistic associations: it feeds the will and is more potent on an empty stomach. Tolkien does not say that *lembas* is a communion wafer or that it *allegorizes* the communion wafer, but that *lembas* has a spiritual reality which is Eucharistic in a broad sense. Like a communion wafer, *lembas* gives one the power to stay on the journey. It communicates grace. Tolkien never gives a catalog of specific characters, items, or scenes that could be deduced as products of a Catholic imagination at work. One would never expect him to. But what this letter reveals is a facet of how his imagination operates—that he creates with a Catholic mind. In addition, it is the Catholic “colour” of the author’s mind that transfers to the text, which becomes clear in scenes such as that of the flower-crowned but beheaded king.

How does a Catholic understanding of reality affect Tolkien as the creator of plot? He gives a very detailed discussion of this in a 1956 letter to Michael Straight, in which he discusses Frodo’s “catastrophe,” the moment in which Frodo decides not to destroy the Ring, but keep it for himself. The plot, Tolkien says, can be understood as exemplifying (a word he italicizes) two petitions from the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Tolkien says, the Quest is “the story of humble Frodo’s development to the ‘noble’, his *sanctification*” (my emphasis). He explains that the prayer not to be led into temptation is a prayer that one retain the power to resist

48 Ibid., 288.

temptation, but finally, at the end, Frodo's will is completely overborne. Using Eucharistic language, Tolkien describes how Frodo has been confronted with a "sacrificial situation":

[T]here are abnormal situations in which one may be placed. 'Sacrificial situations' I should call them: sc. Positions in which the 'good' of the world depends on the behaviour of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal—even, it may happen (or seem, humanly speaking), demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his 'will': that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under duress.

Frodo was in such a position: an apparently complete trap.⁴⁹

What is striking about this passage is how thoroughly theologized it is. Tolkien is not saying Frodo is a "Christ-figure," but he is saying that Frodo acts very much like a disciple who takes up his cross to follow Christ. Frodo's trek into Mordor *sanctifies* him, sanctification being a specifically Christian term referring to one's growth in grace as a result of commitment to Christ, a commitment that always has a sacrificial aspect. To carry Frodo's imitation of Christ further, his sacrifice brings about the salvation of the world, if not from sin, at least from Sauron.

Another petition of the Lord's Prayer brings Frodo's plot-line to conclusion: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is Frodo's forgiveness of Gollum which finally saves the day, when Frodo's will gives out and Gollum has to bite off Frodo's finger to get the Ring. Tolkien explains:

[A]t this point the 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. At any point any prudent person would have told Frodo that Gollum would certainly betray him, and could rob him in the end. To 'pity' him, to forbear to kill him, was a piece of folly, or a mystical belief in the ultimate value-in-itself of pity and generosity even if disastrous in the world of time. He did rob him and injure him in the end—but by a 'grace', that last

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one cd. have done for Frodo! By a situation created by his 'forgiveness', he was saved himself and relieved of his burden.⁵⁰

Here, Tolkien gives us the theological scaffolding of the central plot line of the *Lord of the Rings*, which extends from the beginning of the book, when Frodo wishes that Bilbo had killed Gollum, to the point where Frodo's pity for Gollum loses him a finger and saves the world. Pity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, grace, salvation, the Lord's Prayer: these are all part of the Christian lens through which Tolkien envisions his story. He does very little to foreground or "flag" characters, scenes, objects, events, plot lines, or places as having a Christian valence. But he clearly believes that Christian categories of all kinds are tools that he is using in the construction of Middle-earth, and the product is a sub-creation that is "fundamentally religious and Catholic."

The moral compass that Tolkien describes in this letter is definitively Christian, separating it from the morality of classical Greece or Rome in the single most important way: on the basis of loving not for the good of oneself, but for the good of the other. Classical thought was no stranger to pity or compassion or forgiveness, but never without a utilitarian aspect. But, as Tolkien says, in Christianity, forgiveness and mercy are values in themselves, regardless of their earthly consequences. They are a divine imperative, and Christians, like Frodo, have "a mystical belief in [their] ultimate value."

In several letters Tolkien simply declares the Christian orientation of *The Lord of the Rings*. In his private notes on W. H. Auden's review of the book, Tolkien noted, "In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is basically not about 'freedom', though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour."⁵¹ In a subsequent letter to Auden, Tolkien wrote: "I don't feel under an obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief, which is asserted somewhere . . .

⁵⁰ Ibid., 234.

⁵¹ Ibid., 243.

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where Frodo asserts that the orcs are not evil in origin.”⁵² Frodo in that scene tells Sam that Mordor can create nothing, only mar what is already created—a thumbnail description of the Augustinian idea that evil has no positive existence, but is an absence, a deformation of creation by subtraction.



Let us look at two of the most personal of Tolkien’s letters to get a sense of where the Catholic apparitions in Tolkien’s story may reside. These letters deal with religious experiences of Tolkien that border on the mystical. The first, a draft letter to Carole Batten-Phelps in 1971, deals with the origin of *The Lord of the Rings* and spiritual power in the book itself:

A few years ago I was visited in Oxford by a man whose name I have forgotten (though I believe he was well-known). He had been much struck by the curious way in which many old pictures seemed to him to have been designed to illustrate *The Lord of the Rings* long before its time. He brought one or two reproductions. I think he wanted at first simply to discover whether my imagination had fed on pictures, as it clearly had been by certain kinds of literature and language. When it became obvious that, unless I was a liar, I had never seen the pictures before and was not well acquainted with pictorial Art, he fell silent. I became aware that he was looking fixedly at me. Suddenly he said: ‘of course you don’t suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?’⁵³

This rather jolted Tolkien, who relates in previous letters that he had long felt he wasn’t making up his story about Middle-earth but discovering it.⁵⁴

Pure Gandalf! I was too well acquainted with G. to expose myself rashly, or to ask what he meant. I think I said: ‘No, I don’t suppose so any longer.’ I have never since been able to

⁵² Ibid., 355.

⁵³ Ibid., 413.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 145 and 231. Tolkien says the stories “arose in my mind as given things,” and “I have long ceased to *invent*. . . . I wait until I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself.”

suppose so. An alarming conclusion for an old philologist to draw concerning his private amusement. But not one that should puff any one up who considers the imperfections of 'chosen instruments', and indeed what sometimes seems their lamentable unfitness for the purpose.⁵⁵

Imperfections indeed! But look what Tolkien is considering: that he is writing with inspiration, perhaps even divine inspiration. This implies that he has produced a book that contains "divinity," at least in the less exalted sense that it is about divine truth. But where does that truth reside? For his visitor, especially in Tolkien's landscapes. But even in Tolkien, rivers and mountains do not announce their doctrinal preoccupations or allegiances. Yet I, and perhaps millions of others, have felt what Tolkien's visitor felt. Tolkien goes further yet, to address his correspondent's sense of "sanctity" in the book:

You speak of a 'sanity and sanctity' in the *L.R.* 'which is a power in itself.' I was deeply moved. Nothing of the kind had been said to me before. But by a strange chance, just as I was beginning this letter, I had one from a man, who classified himself as 'an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling . . . but you,' he said, 'create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp.' I can only answer: 'Of his own sanity no man can securely judge. If sanctity inhabits his work or as a pervading light illumines it then it does not come from him. And neither of you would perceive it in these terms unless it was with you also. Otherwise you would see and feel nothing, or (if some other spirit was present) you would be filled with contempt, nausea, hatred. "Leaves out of the elf-country, gah!" "Lembas—dust and ashes, we don't eat that."'

This correspondence concerns itself with the taste of *The Lord of the Rings*, the overall impression that it gives Batten-Phelps and the two people Tolkien writes about. "Sanctity" and "grace" and "light" are the words they apply. Tolkien doesn't refuse them, and I don't think it is an act of pomposity on his part. He also

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

feels *The Lord of the Rings* has been given to him as a gift. Moreover, to react to the book with violent disgust, as Gollum does to the communion wafer-like *lembas*, is to refuse grace. (The phrase “if some other spirit was present” is probably derived straight from the language of Ignatian meditation—“discernment of spirits.”) These are speculations verging on enormous Christian claims, and a critic who wants a full understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* must account on the basis of the text for this reader’s response, which I doubt is unusual.

Critics who want to discount Tolkien’s letters as evidence for Catholic content in *The Lord of the Rings* have a tough chore in getting around them. Robert Hutton attempts to accomplish it by asserting that Tolkien felt embarrassment in the pagan sources of his work and wanted to impose a Catholic interpretation after the fact. Tolkien’s letters, thus, are “targeted at particular recipients for specific ends” and have “a defensive air.”⁵⁶ This is psychologically speculative and very weak. The last volume of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1955. The seminal works in which Tolkien establishes his Christian artistic agenda are all published before *The Lord of the Rings* is finished. These are “The Monsters and the Critics” (1936), “On Fairy-Stories” (1939, with particular emphasis), “Mythopoeia” (1931), and “Leaf by Niggle” (1938–39), these last three to be discussed in the next chapter. The letters are more specific adumbrations of what might be expected to follow from his more general intentions and beliefs. The letter to Robert Murray was written in response to Murray’s comments on the pre-publication galleys of *The Lord of the Rings*, and most of the other letters I have cited occur in the 1950s, shortly after publication. What is remarkable is the consistency of Tolkien’s thought about the relationship of myth (including his own) to Christian truth, from “Mythopoeia” in 1931 to the end of his life in 1973.

The last letter to consider of relevance to Tolkien’s sacramental view of the world is independent of *The Lord of the Rings* or any of his writings, but sheds light on the kind of mind he possessed—acutely visual, symbolic, attentive to detail, and mystically inclined. The letter is to his son Christopher, in the RAF,

⁵⁶ Hutton, “The Pagan Tolkien,” 58; Hutton’s argument goes from 57–59.

who has written about his guardian angel. The date is November 1944.

I had [a sudden vision] not long ago when spending half an hour in St. Gregory's before the Blessed Sacrament when the Quarant' Ore was being held there. I perceived or thought of the Light of God and in it suspended one small mote (or millions of motes to only one of which was my small mind directed), glittering white because of the individual ray from the Light which both held and lit it. (Not that there were individual rays issuing from the Light, but the mere existence of the mote and its position in relation to the Light was in itself a line, and the line was Light). And the ray was the Guardian Angel of the mote: not a thing interposed between God and the creature, but God's very attention itself, personalized. And I do not mean 'personified', by a mere figure of speech according to the tendencies of human language, but a real (finite) person. Thinking of it since—for the whole thing was very immediate, and not recapturable in clumsy language, certainly not the great sense of joy that accompanied it and the realization that the shining poised mote was myself (or any other human person that I might think of with love)—it occurred to me that . . . this is a finite parallel to the Infinite. As the love of the Father and the Son (who are infinite and equal) is a Person [the Holy Spirit], so the love and attention of the Light to the Mote is a person (that is both with us and in Heaven): finite but divine: i.e., angelic.⁵⁷

This mystical Johannine experience of Trinitarian love and light may well have something to teach us about scenes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien describes its demonic reversal in the scene on Amon Hen, where the fiery eye of Sauron searches for Frodo, attempting to connect to him, and then does connect. The gaze of Sauron is like a beam of demonic light, moving across the landscape. Its angelic opposite is the opening of the dawn sunlight on the Rohirrim before Théoden leads the charge against the Orcs at the Fields of Pelennor, the beams of the setting sun falling on the broken-off head of the statue-king at the end of "Journey to the Crossroads," the blazing light around the

⁵⁷ *Letters*, 99.

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White Rider in Fangorn Forest, the beams of sunrise shining off Éowyn's golden hair as she confronts the Nazgûl King, and Frodo's felt inclusion in the tableau of Elrond, Aragorn, and Arwen at the feast in his honor in Rivendell, as Arwen gazes at him. These scenes do not didactically speak of grace or its reverse, but Tolkien's letters provide a warrant for thinking about them, and the rest of *The Lord of the Rings*, in the context of Catholic spirituality. In fact, Tolkien seems to guarantee it is there to find.