

INTRODUCTION

Light From an Invisible Lamp

The *Lord of the Rings*, though panned by many academics and intellectuals, has for half a century been one of the most popular books in the history of English literature.¹ Wikipedia lists it as the second best-selling novel of all time, at 150 million copies, behind *A Tale of Two Cities*. *The Hobbit* ranks as number 4 with 135 million sales.² Those who dislike Tolkien's work tend to dislike both it and him intensely. Some associate Tolkien with an atavistic and authoritarian Catholicism and all the baggage they assume goes with it. Others see him, usually in addition, as the constructor of an infantile and escapist fairy-story, naively patriarchal, and misogynistic.³ Harold Bloom condescendingly says about "Tolkien's trilogy," that, "Its style is quaint, pseudobiblical, overly melodramatic, and its personages are so much cardboard.

1 Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 2000). Shippey's "Foreword" has an excellent summary of Tolkien's popularity and the vitriolic intellectual response.

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books, accessed April 1, 2013.

3 Edmund Wilson was one of the first detractors in "Oo, Those Awful Orcs," *The Nation* (April 14, 1956). For more current examples, see Jenny Turner's ironically titled "Reasons for Liking Tolkien," *London Review* 23, no. 22 (15 November 2001), in which she credits Tolkien and his work with paranoia, soggy-sentimentality, and male supremacy. My favorite detractor is Germaine Greer: "it has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century. The bad dream has materialized [in] 'the book of the century.'" *W: The Waterstone's Magazine* (Winter/Spring 1997) 8: 2–9; W.H. Auden, on the other hand, hardly a sentimentalist, loved the book. See his two reviews, "The Hero is a Hobbit," *The New York Times* (October 31, 1954), on *The Fellowship of the Ring*; "At the End of the Quest, Victory," *The New York Times* (January 22, 1956), on *The Return of the King*.

But then, I am aware that my standards are literary-critical, and many now find them archaic in our age of pop culture.”⁴ Thus Bloom manages to preen while his scholarship fails. Tolkien never meant *The Lord of the Rings* to be published as anything but one book and only accepted a tripartite split at the insistence of his publisher, Allen & Unwin.⁵ Bloom’s rejection of Tolkien’s style is finally a rejection of epic register, but to reject that is to deny the possibility of writing a heroic romance in the 20th century. Tolkien writes in many registers, from the psalm-like proclamations of eagles to the mundane and novelistic speech of Hobbits, and he needs them all to create the multi-layered world of Middle-earth.⁶ What might strike Bloom as “quaint” in all of this is not just Tolkien’s prose, but what it dramatizes: a pre-modern sense of self that understands its source of meaning to be located, not within an expressive and experimental self that is essentially private, but from without, in allegiance to neighborhood, friends, kingdoms, and however hidden, to angelic powers and ultimately to God.⁷ This, I hope to show, is part of what it means to have a “sacramental imagination.”

Tolkien stated that death was the central concern of *The Lord*

4 Harold Bloom, ed. *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’* (NY: Infobase Publishing, 2008). Bloom has not gotten past his distaste for Tolkien’s fiction into any significant reading of biographical background or publication history. In addition to the goof about Tolkien’s “trilogy,” he also asserts that at the Western Front Tolkien “was wounded,” whereas he was evacuated with trench fever.

5 *Letters*, 163–65; Tolkien did not want *The Lord of the Rings* split into three parts. Also see, on this topic, Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 213.

6 For an argument that Tolkien writes beautiful prose, see Steve Walker’s meticulous study, *The Power of Tolkien’s Prose: Middle-Earth’s Magical Style* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

7 For a history of the development of the modern self, two good starting points are Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007); a good overview is provided in Ron Highfield, *God, Freedom & Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

of *the Rings*, but Michael Moorcock, who calls the book “Epic Pooh,” claims its central fault is that it ignores death. He then indicts Tolkien for being plagued by nostalgia for a lost countryside and failure to “derive any pleasure from the realities of urban industrial life.”⁸ Tolkien was outspoken about his distaste for the modern urban world, and, I believe, would have admitted nostalgia for the countryside of his youth. But he certainly would not have thought love of the countryside “infantile,” and neither would a line of England’s best poets from Thomas Traherne through Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hopkins. Tolkien’s greatest villains hate the countryside and try to destroy it, as they do all of creation. They mean to desecrate the world and, therefore, desacramentalize it.

Even readers who love *The Lord of the Rings* are sometimes allergic to the idea that a specifically Catholic vision is part of the work. “After speaking on Tolkien in San Francisco and New York City, critic Joseph Pearce witnessed some members of the audience leaving the room ‘upon hearing that Tolkien’s Catholicism was an integral and crucial part of *The Lord of the Rings*.’”⁹ This reaction can also be found among some critics who screen out Christian influence or reject the idea that Catholic Christianity is displayed in Tolkien’s work in any significant way. Philip Pullman, who had a moment of notoriety with the book, *His Dark Materials*, dismisses Tolkien simply on the basis of his Catholicism: “Tolkien was a Catholic, for whom the basic issues of life were not in question, because the Church had all the answers. So nowhere in ‘The Lord of the Rings’ is there a moment’s doubt about those big questions. No one is in any doubt about what’s

8 Michael Moorcock, “Epic Pooh,” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’*, 3–18. Moorcock indicts orthodox Catholic writers and their imagined public, the petit bourgeoisie, *en masse*: “Like Chesterton, and other Orthodox Christian writers who substituted faith for artistic rigor he [Tolkien] sees the petit bourgeoisie, the honest artisans and peasants, as the bulwark against Chaos,” 5–6.

9 Paul E. Kerry, “Tracking Catholic Influence in *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *The Ring and The Cross*, ed. Paul E. Kerry (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012), 239, quoting Joseph Pearce, “Tolkien Revisited,” *Saint Austin Review* (January–February 2003): 1.

good or bad; everyone knows where the good is, and what to do about the bad. Enormous as it is, TLOTR is consequently trivial.”¹⁰ But Pullman’s ignorance of the Catholic Church is abysmal. It has always understood that God and his Creation are mysterious, beyond human understanding, and has maintained a lively debate about the conjunction of moral rules, happiness, and the demands of love since its foundation.¹¹ One might rather say, with a more profound writer than Pullman, Walker Percy, that it is the materialists who look for the pat explanations:

This life is too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then to be asked what you make of it and have to answer “Scientific humanism.” That won’t do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e., God. In fact I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don’t see why anyone should settle for less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and would not let go until God identified himself and blessed him.¹²

Tolkien, with Percy, does not settle for less. And it is not true that Tolkien fails to present his characters with moral dilemmas, including the most important one in human politics, whether the end ever justifies the means. Tolkien’s characters have clear-cut moral decisions and face the pervasive problem of finding the will to deny self-interest and pursue the right, which is the human dilemma most of the time. We do not usually dwell in some ambiguous moral twilight, however much such border-zones are loved by modern philosophers and fiction writers.

¹⁰ Email interview with Peter T. Chattaway, November 28, 2007, in *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/filmchat/2007/11/philip-pullman-the-extended-e-mail-interview.html>, accessed October 17, 2013.

¹¹ For an excellent introduction to that discussion, see Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* 2nd ed. (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

¹² Walker Percy, “Questions They Never Asked Me,” from *Esquire* 88 (December 1977) in Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds. *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 175. [Author’s note: Percy goes on to point out that *aholt* is a Louisiana expression.]

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

There is something to be said for dealing with the main problem of our lives: finding the will to do what we know is right. If this provides a trivial topic for literary exploration, then *Crime and Punishment* too would have to be marked down as “trivial.”

I find among my students that those who enjoy Tolkien are initially drawn in by an exciting adventure with Hobbits, Elves, Wizards, and Orcs, but there is something more in Tolkien that attracts his huge audience: his creation of a world that is both mysterious and meaningful all the way down. As students delve into the religious and metaphysical underpinning of Middle-earth, they become even more attracted to it. There is a good reason for this. They come to the humanities looking for meaning—they want to understand what a good life is and how to live it, whether there is “truth” and what it might be; they look for beauty and sublimity in literature and an enlarged understanding of who they are.

Many of them are attracted by Tolkien’s vision of the holy. *The Lord of the Rings* has a numinous quality. It comes in part from Tolkien’s unique ability to suggest great depths of time, which he does through the creation of ancient languages, the continual suggestion of providential depth, and the display of immense and psychologically productive landscapes. Tolkien uses landscape in the same way as Tennyson, “not as a decorative adjunct to character but as the mythopoetic soil in which character is rooted and takes its being.”¹³ The Shire, Rivendell, Lothlórien, Gondor, and Rohan tell us much about their inhabitants. By knowing geography, we come to know people whose selves grow organically from their native soil. In addition, Tolkien’s panoramic vistas, by which his travelers orient themselves, display a broad range of moral and psychic potential. The continual question for the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* is, “Which way do we go?” This is both a practical question and a spiritual one: stay on the Great

13 John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 67–68; quoted by Andrew Lynch, “Archaism, Nostalgia, and Tennysonian War in *The Lord of the Rings*,” in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds. *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 77–92.

Road or get off it? Caradheras or Moria? Gondor or Mordor? The Black Gate or Cirith Ungol? Each landscape presents a moral choice and actualizes a spiritual condition, from comfort to desolation. Tolkien's most lyric descriptions of the world his characters pass through are founded in a deep gratitude for creation, the foundation of his spiritual and ethical vision.

Finally, like all great works of art, *The Lord of the Rings* has a taste all its own that defies restatement in critical analysis. One "tastes" its particular enchantment or one does not. For those who can taste it, Tolkien alerts them to a deep hollow in contemporary life and a way it might be filled. It is a hollow many nineteenth- and twentieth-century English writers felt and resisted: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and G.K. Chesterton, as well as Eliot, Auden, Waugh, Lewis and their immediate predecessors, all of whom held out for a universe which was both meaningful and beyond human comprehension, in which God and the three transcendentals were assumed to exist, objectively, not according to taste. These men, with Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy on the American side, were either Roman Catholics or "Catholic" in the broad sense of the word. They believed in a Christian reality that just *was* reality.¹⁴ A secularized literature, by excluding God, was a maimed literature; it could only present a maimed and distorted view of the world, for it had sliced away the most real thing in it.

14 This group of artists and thinkers was mainly powered by Catholic converts such as Newman, Hopkins, Chesterton, Waugh, Graham Greene, and, at a very young age, through his mother, Tolkien himself. Christopher Dawson, the historian, was one of the most influential. On the American side, converts included Orestes Brownson, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. Books about this efflorescence of Catholic thought, which passes unnoticed by the big literary anthologies or departments of English, include: Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (NY: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2003) and Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Other English and American converts with influence in the world of letters and art include Oscar Wilde, Muriel Spark, Alec Guinness, Avery Cardinal Dulles, G.E.M. Anscombe, and, oddly enough, Buffalo Bill Cody.

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

Tolkien's main contribution to the "recovery" of reality in art was, he claimed, to write not a novel, but a heroic romance, "a much older and quite different variety of literature,"¹⁵ of which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which Tolkien edited, and *Morte D'Arthur* are examples. *The Lord of the Rings* is in many ways a novel—the Hobbits of necessity bring in the level of mundane, which is the novel's hallmark—but it is also full of the elements of chivalric romance: great martial deeds, fiercely loyal lovers, wizards, strange creatures, the irruption of the supernatural into the natural. Tolkien creates with a pre-modern sense of reality—a mythopoetic sense—and Middle-earth, though under attack by evil forces and deathly assumptions, is so alive that trees talk and even mountains have malevolent dispositions. "Mythopoeia," refers to the entire process of myth-making throughout history; in Tolkien's use of the word "mythopoesis," however, he also includes the deliberate construction of myth, the process by which one author sets forth the numinous dimension of reality in story. Tolkien gives us a world, 6000 years before the birth of Christ, placed roughly in Northwest Europe, which he positions theologically between man's fall and ultimate redemption¹⁶—a world which has not yet been "disenchanted,"¹⁷ which is uninformed by Christian revelation and yet informed by it as an underlying providential rhythm.

Whether his readers realize it or not, Tolkien's meaningful world is specifically embedded in a Roman Catholic account of what reason is and, more importantly, what is real. This account combines Hellenic and Judaic thought to give an explanation of why we assume the world can be rationally understood in the same way, day after day. Andrew Davison gives a thumbnail description of the genealogy of Western rationality that might

¹⁵ *Letters*, 414.

¹⁶ *Letters*, 387: "The Fall of Man is in the past and off stage; the Redemption of Man in the far future."

¹⁷ The famous phrase is Max Weber's, adapted from Frederick Schiller. See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, "Bureaucracy and Charisma: A Philosophy of History," in *Charisma, History and Social Structure*, Ronald Glassman and William H. Swatos, Jr. eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 11.

make even atheists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett feel uncomfortably Christian:

As Einstein is said to have put it: 'what is most incomprehensible about the world is that it is comprehensible.' In other words, why does the world make sense? What right have we to assume that it should? Christians can make sense of the universe's sense, saying that it is God's creation, made after the pattern of the Son, who is Word, Reason, or Logos. There is logic because there is Logos; the world is open to reason because there is Reason in God. . . . It is part of the Christian faith that we have an account of why it is so.¹⁸

Tolkien places the Logos in his universe through the Music of Ilúvatar, and this makes it not only meaningful, but grace-full. A universe created by the Logos runs on an economy of grace and graceful transactions—sacramental transactions—which fill *The Lord of the Rings* from beginning to end.

In this book, I will argue for four general propositions in order of increasing specificity: 1) *The Lord of the Rings* is a "Catholic Novel," written by a Catholic author; 2) The idea of the Logos, as set forth in the prologue of the Gospel of John and developed in patristic and medieval theology, is largely incorporated into Tolkien's creation myth, *The Ainulindalë*; 3) Tolkien is influenced by wide biblical understanding and imagery throughout his work, particularly the Gospel of John, letters attributed to John, and Catholic sacramental theology; and 4) Tolkien's Logos-centric universe in the *Ainulindalë* becomes the foundation for his portrayal of Arda (Earth) from a sacramental perspective in *The Lord of the Rings*.

My last three claims rest upon Tolkien's understanding of the relationship of Truth to myth, including the myths that people deliberately make up. Specifically, it is about the relationship of his own works, such as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* to Truth. I capitalize Truth, because for Tolkien, a devout Catholic Christian, God was the Truth, and the Logos of

¹⁸ "Christian Reason and Christian Community," in Andrew Davison, ed. *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Kindle Location 680–97.

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

John's Gospel—the Incarnate Word—its most humanly powerful expression. Tolkien believed, with John, that “the true Light” of Christ enlightened “every man” (John 1:9), though the closer to the Logos people stood, the more light their minds received.

If we imagine a solar system, with the Divine Logos, “the Word” of St. John's prologue, at the center like a blazing sun, and world mythologies swirling like planets around it, we have a good picture of Tolkien's basic idea. At the closest orbit to the Son/Sun we have salvation history, the “true myth,” the Word which Tolkien believed God himself was inscribing in human events, the most important chapter being the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Orbiting very closely to the Truth as inscribed in history is the recording of that truth in the Bible, especially the four gospels. At farther removes, and with more or less eccentric orbits, were other world mythologies. The ones which came in closest, perhaps more like comets than planets, were the rising and dying god myths attached to Near East, Eastern, Greek, and Germanic deities such as Baal, Melqart, Ishtar, Adonis, Eshmun, Tammuz, Ra, Dionysius, Persephone, Odin and Baldur. That there were many such myths was not, for Tolkien, to suggest that Christianity was just another dying and rising god myth, but rather a confirmation of Christian belief: not so much the worse for Christianity, but so much the better for the pagans that so many of them in so many places and times had seen part of the Truth. Closely akin to myth, and gravitating toward it were fairy stories, whose miraculous, happy endings, achieved after hope is lost, catch an Easter-like joy.

For Tolkien, the supreme true myth of the gospels was one in which the Logos, Art, and History had fused:

There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.¹⁹

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *Tree and Leaf* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 72.

This was the supremely centripetal tale that drew men in, whether they wanted or not, whether they realized it or not.

Within Tolkien's Logos-centric system we also can place deliberately constructed myths, which also take a position with respect to Truth, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Commedia*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Tolkien's own legendarium. In love with Germanic myth, Tolkien placed the orbit of his work somewhere between the biblical account of Truth and those myths and sagas, which included not only Norse and Celtic mythology, but Anglo-Saxon literature such as *Beowulf*, "The Wanderer," and *The Battle of Maldon*. The Greek and Roman gods have a place in his myth as well. One of Tolkien's correspondents told him that, "you create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp."²⁰ That invisible lamp is the Logos, shining through Germanic myth. My purpose is to examine the sacramental Christian reality at the foundation of the Germanic myths that forms *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien described as a "fundamentally religious and Catholic work."²¹



Tolkien's life could also be described by this Logos-centric model. For the orphaned Tolkien, the Catholic Church became his home and a priest his foster-father. This formed the core of this character. His love of languages and Germanic mythology followed shortly thereafter, so much so, that he first began to create his own languages and then realized he needed a mythic world to put them in, for languages themselves were essentially mythic.

Tolkien was not Catholic by birth, but his early life put him inside Catholic spirituality, liturgy, and thought to an unusual degree, at a time when English Catholics still had a sense of themselves as a persecuted minority. Tolkien literally lived *within* the Catholic Church as a boy, in the Birmingham Oratory, where he inhaled that inflection of Catholicism associated with Cardinal John Henry Newman: the English love of nature, commonsense,

²⁰ *Letters*, 413.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

and the sacraments. Add to this a playful acceptance of eccentricity, an appreciation of tobacco and beer, a seemingly unquenchable thirst for languages, and a fascination with “Northerness,” the myths and sagas of Germanic legend, and one gets a good sense of Tolkien’s imaginative world.

His father died in South Africa, when Tolkien was three, after he, his brother Hillary, and his mother, Mabel, had moved back to England. She became a Catholic convert in 1900. She had been raised in the Anglican Church, but, when Tolkien was eight, she was received into the Church of Rome together with her sister, May. Conversion not only isolated Mabel both from her family, the Suffields, and from the Tolkiens, but subjected her to their anger and outrage. She was virtually disowned and had to find a way to survive on her own with her two young sons, John Ronald Reuel and Hilary. Mabel remained true to her faith and began instructing her sons in it.

When Tolkien was ten, Mabel moved her family from the Sussex countryside to Birmingham, into a house next to the Grammar School of St. Philip, which was very close to the Birmingham Oratory and staffed by its clergy. The Oratory had been founded by Newman, who died within its walls during the year of Mabel’s conversion. It had been home to Newman’s pupil, Gerard Manley Hopkins, during the first months of Hopkins’s conversion.

At St. Philip, Mabel’s sons received a Catholic education, and Mabel became friends with Father Francis Xavier Morgan, who would become a foster-father to John Ronald and Hilary. Humphrey Carpenter gives this sketch of Fr. Morgan:

Francis Morgan . . . had an immense fund of kindness and humour and a flamboyance that was often attributed to his Spanish connections. Indeed he was a very noisy man, loud and affectionate, embarrassing to small children at first but hugely lovable when they got to know him. He soon became an indispensable part of the Tolkien household.

Without his friendship, life for Mabel and her sons would have shown scant improvement on the previous two years.²²

²² Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 35.

Mabel Tolkien died in 1904 in a cottage on the grounds of a country house built by Cardinal Newman as a retreat for Oratory clergy. She had diabetes, and she was exhausted. Nine years after her death, Tolkien wrote in a letter, "My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith."²³

Mabel's death, like baptism and confirmation, sealed Tolkien as a Catholic. Tolkien remembered his mother as one who had lived a life of self-sacrificing love, fulfilling her baptismal vocation by participating in Christ's self-sacrificing love. She was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Bromsgrove and, on her grave, Fr. Morgan placed a cross of the same design used for Oratory clergy. Mabel had appointed him guardian of her two sons, probably to prevent relatives from taking them out of the Catholic Church. Morgan not only supported the boys with the little money that Mabel had left, but with his own. The boys went to live with an aunt, Beatrice Suffield, who gave them little affection and a rather miserable home, but the Oratory was near and became their real home. Humphrey Carpenter describes the brothers' routine:

Early in the morning they would hurry round to serve mass for Father Francis at his favourite side-altar in the Oratory church. Afterwards they would eat breakfast in the plain refectory, and then, when they had played their usual game of spinning the kitchen cat around in the revolving food-hatch, they would set off for school.²⁴

If we had access to the conversations between Fr. Morgan and the Tolkien boys, before and after mass, we might understand a lot about how Tolkien's sacramental vision was formed. Perhaps Tolkien's fullest and most personal statement of belief is contained in a long letter to his son Michael, written on 1 November 1963, only a few weeks before the death of C. S. Lewis. In it we see

²³ Carpenter, 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

a characteristic reliance on the Gospel of St. John and its implicit Logos-centered sacramental theology:

It takes a fantastic will to unbelief to suppose that Jesus never really 'happened', and more to suppose that he did not say the things recorded of him—so incapable of being 'invented' by anyone in the world at that time: such as 'before Abraham came to be I am' (John viii). . . or the promulgation of the Blessed Sacrament in John v: 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life.' We must therefore believe in Him and in what he said and take the consequences; or reject him and take the consequences. . . .

The only cure for sagging of fainting faith is Communion. Though always Itself, perfect and complete and inviolate, the Blessed Sacrament does not operate completely and once for all in any of us. Like the act of Faith it must be continuous and grow by exercise. Frequency is of the highest effect. Seven times a week is more nourishing than seven times at intervals.²⁵

The sacraments were bone-deep in Tolkien. They were established in him during his boyhood, as love for the English countryside and the sacrament of communion grew together.

One might ask at this point just how a Catholic sacramental vision differs from a Protestant one, for even Calvinists like Jonathan Edwards saw a powerful sacramental dimension in the world about them,²⁶ and many of the English Romantic poets, Unitarian or Anglican (a progression that Coleridge went through), saw it as well, and Anglicans, from Thomas Traherne to Evelyn Underhill, have valued mysticism and the sacramental aspect of nature. But I would argue there is a difference in degree and in kind. There is a pronounced Catholic habit of seeing a sacramental dimension to all of creation. Andrew Greeley recognizes it as a fundamental characteristic of the Catholic imagination: "It sees created reality as a 'sacrament,' that is, a revelation of the presence of God."²⁷ Flannery O'Connor sees what her fiction

²⁵ *Letters*, 338–339.

²⁶ See Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially 105.

²⁷ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

depicts, the sacramental character of life as a whole: "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."²⁸ In addition to this mental habit of seeing the world as sacramental, Catholic participation in at least two specific sacraments, communion and penance, is continuous. Tolkien's experience as an altar boy immersed him in the sacrament of communion daily, and, with the exception of one period in his life, Tolkien took Holy Communion daily. This practice is unavailable to Protestants, except in a few high Anglican churches, but Catholic belief and practice foster daily communion, and Tolkien's belief that frequency makes a difference is Catholic orthodoxy.

Perhaps even more distinctively, Roman Catholics are comfortable with the belief that even human productions can be mediators of God's grace. The stained glass windows and colorful murals that Puritans smashed and white-washed as idolatrous did not represent idols to Catholics, but doorways to a larger world of grace which they both symbolized and participated in. The distinction between Catholic and Anglican can be found in Lewis's disapproval, when Tolkien mentioned he had a special devotion to St. John (see chapter 3). No longer would Tolkien be able to talk to Lewis about the things he loved in Catholicism, "the rood screen" through which Catholics viewed "the holy of holies." That rood screen was a very human one, fully participating in human production: saints' lives, relics, painting, music, and statuary, represented at their most extreme in the baroque chapel of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and the Cathedral of Santiago in Spain. We see this sensibility in Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle," in which Niggle's single painted leaf mediates the enormous reality of an entire landscape, later made real by God. Tolkien's work has a sacramental dimension that we can think of as broadly Christian, but the tendency to see the numinous in the world is prevalently Catholic and manifests itself in *The Lord of the Rings* in specifically Catholic ways.

²⁸ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1957), 152



Tolkien's mother began teaching him Latin, French, and German, before he entered King Edward's School in 1900 at the age of eight, and she saw that he had a talent for languages. In 1902, Tolkien had to leave King Edward's because of the expense, and he went to St. Philip's. But it was not as good a school as King Edward's, and a scholarship enabled Tolkien to return there the following year, where he stayed until entering Oxford in 1911.

Tolkien became proficient in Latin and Greek and virtually taught himself Old English, Middle English, including the dialect used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Old Norse, Gothic, and Spanish. He also picked up some Welsh and made Finnish a goal, when he discovered the *Kalevala*, the collection of poems that formed the mythology of Finland.

How good at these languages was Tolkien before leaving the English equivalent of an excellent private high school? Humphrey Carpenter offers this anecdote:

There was a custom at King Edward's of holding a debate entirely in Latin, but that was almost too easy for Tolkien, and in one debate when taking the role of Greek Ambassador to the Senate he spoke entirely in Greek. On another occasion he astonished his schoolfellows when, in the character of a barbarian envoy, he broke into fluent Gothic; and on a third occasion he spoke in Anglo-Saxon.²⁹

One of Tolkien's teachers at King Edward's, Robert Cray Gilson, was also an excellent linguist and helped Tolkien develop an interest in the general principles and structure of language. This led to Tolkien's hobby of inventing languages. His first encounter with a made-up language was "Animalic," an invention of his cousins, Mary and Margaret Incedon. He learned this language and collaborated with Mary on the invention of another, "Nevbosh," or "The New Nonsense."³⁰ Altogether Tolkien constructed more than twenty languages, including fifteen

²⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

Elvish languages and dialects from three different eras, including Quenya, Noldorin, and Sindarin. Tolkien's Dwarves speak Khuzdul; his Ents Entish; the Powers of Valar Valarin; and Sauron the Black Speech of Mordor. Tolkien worked on his Elvish languages from 1910 to his death in 1973. He acknowledged that his occupation with made-up languages and story writing might be considered eccentric in a university professor whose subject was supposed to be real languages, but he maintained it was an important part of what he did:

It is not a 'hobby', in the sense of something quite different from one's work, taken up as a relief-outlet. The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows. (I once scribbled 'hobbit' on a blank page of some boring school exam. paper in the early 1930's. It was some time before I discovered what it referred to!) I should have preferred to write in 'Elvish'.³¹

In Tolkien's life, we can see, Christianity and "the Word" in its broadest sense grow up together, followed by a love of fairy tales and especially Northern myth. Among the first stories he liked were those in the *Red Fairy Book* of Andrew Lang, especially that of Sigurd and the dragon, Fafnir. He loved George MacDonald's "Curdie" books, and a stage presentation of *Peter Pan* made a great impression on him. At King Edward's, he discovered *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain*, the *Pearl*, and the whole complex of northern European myth.

Tolkien began composing his legendarium in 1913 with a poem about Earendel, based on two lines from *Crist* [Christ], by the Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf: "Lux fulgebat super nos. Eala Earendel engla beorhtast / ofer middangeard monnum sende," which translates as "Hail Earendel, brightest of angels / above the middle-earth sent unto men." Tolkien told the American professor Clyde Kilby that these were "the rapturous words from which ultimately sprang the whole of my mythology."³² It is significant

³¹ *Letters*, 219–220.

³² Bradley J. Birzer, "The 'Last Battle' as Johannine Ragnarök: Tolkien and the Universal," in *The Cross and Ring*, 262. Birzer's source is footnoted "Tolkien

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

that the beginning of Tolkien's mythology finds its origin in a poem about Christ, whose connections to Johannine light would not have been lost on Tolkien.

I was struck by the great beauty of the word [Earendel] (or name) . . . euphonic to a peculiar degree in that pleasing but not 'delectable' language. . . . To my mind, the Anglo-Saxon uses seem plainly to indicate that it was a star presaging the dawn . . . that is what we now call Venus: the morning-star as it may be seen shining brilliantly in the dawn, before the actual rising of the Sun. That is at any rate how I took it. Before 1914 I wrote a 'poem' upon Earendel who launched his ship like a bright spark from the havens of the Sun. I adopted him into my mythology—in which he became a prime figure as a mariner, and eventually as a herald star, and a sign of hope to men.³³

In the poem by Cynewulf, Tolkien interpreted Earendel to be John the Baptist,³⁴ a herald of the Son, as Venus, the morning star, is the herald of the Sun. We get a clue here as to how Tolkien will construct a Germanic mythology with Christian depth. When Eärendil appears in *The Silmarillion* as one of the redeemers of Middle-earth, there will be no obvious connection to either Christ or John the Baptist. But he has some of the functions of both and the imagery of light and glory that the Bible shares with Germanic myth. There is a sacramental dimension to Eärendil, who fills men's hearts with the grace of hope, a Christian virtue. Thus Tolkien's intellectual development is a rough companion to my picture of Tolkien's intellectual solar system relating truth to myth. Tolkien begins with language and Christianity and soon begins to love mythology and create his own myth out of Northern materials in the light of Christianity.

to Clyde Kilby, December 18, 1965, in WCWC, Folder "JRRT to Miscellaneous Correspondents."

³³ *Letters*, 385.

³⁴ Carpenter, 72.

³⁵ A small sample: Bradley Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002); Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings* (NY: Crossroad, 2005); Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battle and Moral Victory*

Although many people have written books on the Christian content and orientation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,³⁵ it is not a universally accepted way of approaching his work. A recent collection of essays, *The Ring and the Cross*,³⁶ takes up the issue of whether Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular have a substantial presence in the book. No one challenges the fact that Tolkien was a devout Catholic, but Tolkien's love of Anglo-Saxon literature and Northern legend is a massive presence in the book, and those who reject a Catholic dimension hold that his myth is grounded in those sources to the exclusion of others. To me, this initially seemed the kind of issue which academics devise to generate conference papers. I recognized the presence of Christianity, when I first read *The Lord of the Rings*: Gandalf's resurrection, Frodo and Sam's trip up Mt. Doom, the Ring as something like the Edenic apple—all seemed to have easy biblical connections.

The books which have most energized my own thinking about Tolkien and Catholicism are Bradley Birzer's *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, Stratford Caldecott's *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings*, Alison Milbank's *Chesterton and*

in *The Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003); Matthew Dickerson, *A Hobbit Journey: Discovering the Enchantment of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012); Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005); Louis Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis* (Chicago: Moody, 2012); Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien, Man and Myth: A Literary Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998); Joseph Pearce, ed., *Tolkien, A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); Richard Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984); Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle-earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

³⁶ Paul E. Kerry, ed., *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), also see the companion collection edited by Kerry, *Light Beyond All Shadow* (Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011).

Introduction: Light From an Invisible Lamp

Tolkien as Theologians, and Ralph C. Wood's *The Gospel According to Tolkien*. There is now a lot of Tolkien criticism, much of it excellent, so I do not aspire to offer a completely new book on Tolkien and Christianity. My debts throughout are great and too numerous to mention without overwhelming the reader with footnotes. I do believe that no one has offered a reading of Tolkien's work as being fundamentally and thoroughly grounded in Catholic sacramentality—that will be the contribution of this book.

For me, this book has been as much a theological meditation as literary explication. My theological inspiration starts with three books: David L. Schindler's *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God*, which renewed my vision of a Logos-centric cosmos and made me see Tolkien in this light; and two books on sacraments: Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* and Herbert McCabe's, *The New Creation*.³⁷ Schindler's book inspired me to examine Tolkien's work within the framework of the Johannine Logos and Catholic sacramentality and Schmemmann's and McCabe's confirmed that as a productive approach and led me back to patristic theologians, who never lost sight of the sacramental dimension of the cosmos.

Late in my revision process, I began to realize, largely due to the books of J. Robert Barth, S.J.,³⁸ that Tolkien's debt to the Romantic poets, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was far greater than I had realized. Some of that understanding will peep into this book, but it is a topic for a book by itself. Coleridge's understanding of the imagination and its symbol-making ability is accepted in the main by Tolkien and explains, among other things, his aversion to allegory. More importantly for my purposes, a sacrament is a specific kind of symbol, referring to a real-

³⁷ David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000); Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010).

³⁸ *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (NY: Fordham University Press, 2001), *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), and *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (NY: Fordham University Press, 1987).

ity greater than itself and in which it participates. Tolkien wrote with this understanding.

Because I want this book to be accessible to all readers of Tolkien, especially students and those not familiar with other criticism, I offer information and support that an academic audience may sometimes find unnecessary. When I envision my audience, I see a class of undergraduate students who have enjoyed reading *The Lord of the Rings* and are eager to read it again and learn more. Still, I hope the greater audience of Tolkien readers and professors as well will find something here that is new and of value.

None of the four main propositions I will argue for leads an existence independent of the others. The first, that Tolkien was a "Catholic novelist" will be the main burden of Chapter I. What it means to be a "Catholic novelist" as opposed to any other kind of novelist is perhaps not readily apparent, but it is grounded in the Catholic sacramental view of the world, and so is important to my argument.

The second proposition, that the Logos of John's Gospel is woven into the spiritual foundation of Middle-earth will be discussed in the second chapter on *The Ainulindalë*. The third and fourth propositions that biblical imagery and sacramentality are interwoven with the Germanic mythos of Middle-earth will be the matter for part of the third chapter and the rest of the book. Tolkien had strong ideas about the relation of truth to myth, and it is necessary to understand these in order to understand the relation of the "true myth" of Christianity to his mythopoetic works, *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien is amazingly forthright about his own work (though he can also be cagey at times). His letters, his essays on *Beowulf* and fairy-stories, his short story "Leaf by Niggle," and his poem to C.S. Lewis, "Mythopoeia," set out a remarkably consistent and thorough explanation of his own artistic agenda and the relation of Art to Logos. As a result, he gives us the general direction in terms of which he wants *The Lord of the Rings* to be read. I set forth his ideas about myth and story and their relation to truth in the third chapter.