

## Tolkien or Nietzsche, Philology and Nihilism

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*He who wants to partake of all good things must know how to be small at times. 1*

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Perhaps it is best to begin with a kind of Tolkienian confession: I am no scholar of J.R.R. Tolkien and am not at all learned in the secondary literature on his works. I am moreover a hack when it comes to either Thomas Aquinas or Friedrich Nietzsche, the two figures at whose intersection I will try to place Tolkien and his work. Since I am more or less ignorant of the criticism on *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, or any of the numerous *opuscula* of his, I must warn you that everything I say in what follows may have already been said, by one much more able and eloquent than me. If such is the case, then I beseech you to an exercise of the characteristically Hobbitic virtue of pity...

### *The Origins of an Allusion*

There seems to be no evidence that J.R.R. Tolkien ever read Friedrich Nietzsche; in fact, as commentators are often somewhat tickled to point out (and something like a myth

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale [Texts in German Philosophy] (Cambridge: CUP 1986) "The Wanderer and His Shadow" ¶51, p. 323.

which Tolkien himself played no small part in constructing 2), it seems that Tolkien read very little from his own century, with the sole exceptions being the works of his fellow convivators in the Eagle and Child. It is perhaps no accident that Tolkien's reading seemed to comport with his drinking—a not entirely bad policy, I might add. I might even suggest that there's something basically very religious about beer, and that this explains in part why the works of Tolkien bear a certain theologic-ity born of friendships nurtured in the public-house, but that is a story for another day. On the other hand there is Nietzsche, the notorious teetotaler who said that “coffee spreads darkness”, the ascetic troglodyte ever in search of pure air, the anti-Christ who once bemoaned “how much beer there is in the German intellect!”<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to imagine, however, that the name of the Hermit of Sils Maria was never invoked during those sessions in St. Giles' Street. As David Thatcher has shown, Nietzsche's presence began to be mildly felt in England, particularly in the arts, by the turn of the century. The distinction of being the first English writer to have encountered Nietzsche, according to tradition, belongs to the poet and dramatist John Davidson, who discovered him as early as 1891, four years before the first English translation of one of Nietzsche's works (*The Case of Wagner*, 1895).<sup>4</sup> From Davidson the influence of Nietzsche spread through Havelock Ellis, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, and others. By the early 1910's, his following was growing steadily, but not without some show of resistance. In any event, it is clear that Nietzsche was far from unknown to

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<sup>2</sup> See the beginning of the essay, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”, in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, as well as Letter 294, to Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, 8 February 1967, in Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1981), p. 377: “I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention.” See also Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 2003), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “What the Germans Lack”, *Twilight of the Idols*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin 1990), p. 72. Regarding beverages of a different cast, I am entirely in sympathy with David Hart's suggestion that “a theological answer to Nietzsche could be developed entirely in terms of the typology of wine.” See *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans 2003), p. 108f. There may be more than just bombast to Nietzsche's claim that “To believe that wine *exhilarates* I should have to be a Christian—believing what for me is an absurdity.” *Ecce Homo*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library 1992), p. 694.

<sup>4</sup> David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England, 1890-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1970), p. 64.

the cultured English (though his introduction into the university curricula, particularly at Oxford, may have been much slower in coming, given the entrenched suspicion of ‘novelty’ (if not of German philologists<sup>5</sup>) there—a source of great consternation to the new English Nietzscheans, no doubt).

What, if any, manner of direct experience Tolkien had with Nietzsche, it is impossible to say. It is, however, difficult to believe that his influence was not felt in some indirect way. It is well-nigh impossible that a man of Tolkien’s learning, his situation in Oxford for forty-three years, from 1925 to 1968, would never have encountered his ideas in some form or another. Neither the rarefied air of high table in Merton College nor the smoke-filled ether of the Eagle and Child could have long remained impervious even to the slightest hint of the “smell” of the “divine decomposition.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1913, just two years after the last of Nietzsche’s un-translated works, *Ecce Homo*, made its appearance in English, Charles Sareola wrote that “A searching estimate of Nietzsche in English still remains to be written. And there is only one man that could write it, and that man is Gilbert K. Chesterton.”<sup>7</sup> Of course Chesterton never wrote such a “searching estimate”, but had written of him, largely negatively, if somewhat superficially, already in *Heretics*, published in 1905, thus making Chesterton’s one of the earliest English responses to Nietzsche, however inadequate his treatment may have been, at least at that early stage.<sup>8</sup> One might be justified in inferring then a kind of

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<sup>5</sup> “Tolkien wrote in 1924, “Philology” is in some quarters treated as though it were one of the things that the late war was fought to end’...When I first read this I took it to be a joke. However, just three years before the British Board of Education had printed a Report in *The Teaching of English in England* which declared, among much else, that philology ought not to be taught to undergraduates, that it was a ‘German-made’ science and...that by contributing to German arrogance it had led in a direct way to the outbreak of World War I.” Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage 1974), ¶125, p. 181, the famous “death of God” passage.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Sareola, “Nietzsche”, *Everyman* (May 16, 1913), p. 136. Quoted in Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England*, p. 207.

<sup>8</sup> Much of Chesterton’s interpretation of Nietzsche focuses on the theory of the *Übermensch*. For example, as he says of George Bernard Shaw: “He has even been infected to some extent with the primary intellectual weakness of his new master, Nietzsche, the strange notion that the

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greater and stronger a man was the more he would despise other things” (G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* [The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton; 1] (San Francisco: Ignatius 1986), p. 68). See also, in the context of H.G. Wells, p. 80:

“Nietzsche summed up all that is interesting in the Superman idea when he said, ‘Man is a thing which has to be surpassed.’ But the very word ‘surpass’ implies the existence of a standard common to us and the thing surpassing us. If the Superman is more manly than men are, of course they will ultimately deify him, even if they happen to kill him first. But if he is simply more supermanly, they may be quite indifferent to him as they would be to another seemingly aimless monstrosity. Mere force or size even is a standard; but that alone will never make men think a man their superior. Giants, as in the wise old fairy-tales, are vermin. Supermen, if not good men, are vermin.”

Nor can I imagine anything that would do humanity more good than the advent of a race of Supermen, for them to fight like dragons. If the Superman is better than we, of course we need not fight him; but in that case, why not call him the Saint? But if he is merely stronger (whether physically, mentally, or morally stronger, I do not care a farthing), then he ought to have to reckon with us at least for all the strength we have. If we are weaker than he, that is no reason why we should be weaker than ourselves. If we are not tall enough to touch the giant’s knees, that is no reason why we should become shorter by falling on our own. But that is at bottom the meaning of all modern hero-worship and celebration of the Strong Man, the Caesar the Superman. That he may be something more than man, we must be something less.

Doubtless there is an older and better hero-worship than this. But the old hero was a being who, like Achilles, was more human than humanity itself. Nietzsche’s Superman is cold and friendless. Achilles is so foolishly fond of his friend that he slaughters armies in the agony of his bereavement. Mr. Shaw’s sad Caesar says in his desolate pride, “He who has never hoped can never despair.” The Man-God of old answers from his awful hill, “Was ever sorrow like unto my sorrow?” A great man is not a man so strong that he feels less than other men; he is a man so strong that he feels more. And when Nietzsche [*sic*] says, “A new commandment I give to you, ‘be hard,’” he is really saying, “A new commandment I give to you, ‘be dead.’” Sensibility is the definition of life” (*Heretics*, pp. 81-2).

Later in *Heretics*, Chesterton’s approbation of Nietzsche becomes more explicit:

“Fastidiousness is the most pardonable of vices; but it is the most unpardonable of virtues. Nietzsche, who represents most prominently this pretentious claim of the fastidious, has a description somewhere—a very powerful description in the purely literary sense—of the disgust and disdain which consume him at the sight of the common people with their common faces, their common voices, and their common minds. As I have said, this attitude is almost beautiful if we may regard it as pathetic. Nietzsche’s aristocracy has about it all the sacredness that belongs to the weak. When he makes us feel that he cannot endure the innumerable faces, the incessant voices, the overpowering omnipresence which belongs to the mob, he will have the sympathy of anybody who has ever been sick on a steamer or tired in a crowded omnibus. Every man has hated mankind when he was less than a man. Every man has had humanity in his eyes like a blinding fog, humanity in his nostrils like a suffocating smell. But when Nietzsche has the incredible lack of humour and lack of imagination to ask us to believe that his aristocracy is an aristocracy of strong muscles or an aristocracy of strong wills, it is necessary to point out the truth. It is an aristocracy of weak nerves” (*Heretics*, p. 139).

See also p. 147:

Now if any one wishes to find a really effective and comprehensible and permanent case for aristocracy well and sincerely stated, let him read, not the modern philosophical

Chesterton-mediated Nietzsche as influencing Tolkien, but as it stands that must remain a conjecture, however likely.

Having said all this, my interest in this paper is not on the direct or indirect influence of Friedrich Nietzsche upon the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, much less on the question of whether *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen as in any way influenced by Nietzschean themes. Rather, I am interested here in what must remain a kind of allusive affinity between the two thinkers. After all, they are both, by profession and by their own admission, philologists, and both are in some way or another suspicious of the mechanization of European culture (though the extent to which Nietzsche's philosophy remained capable of resisting such mechanization, if not actually contributing to it, I will leave to one side). Nonetheless, both Tolkien and Nietzsche shared a problematic, if not caustic, relationship to modernity as a philosophical-cultural problem. In what sense, then, does their shared profession of philology inform their respective 'responses' or 'critiques' of modernity? Moreover, in what sense does philology, for each, offer a kind of redemptive alternative understanding which modernity, however conceived, cannot deliver?

The answers to these questions are not at all straightforward. However, I will suggest in this paper that for Tolkien, philology (understood broadly as "the love of words") returns one to the inescapably linguistic character of all revelation and truth, and points one to a certain conception of the human being as fundamentally sacramental in its

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conservatives, not even Nietzsche, let him read the *Bow Bells Novelettes*. Of the case of Nietzsche I am confessedly more doubtful. Nietzsche and the *Bow Bells Novelette* have both obviously the same fundamental character; they both worship the tall man with curling moustaches and herculean bodily power, and they both worship him in a manner which is somewhat feminine and hysterical. Even here, however, the *Novelette* easily maintains its philosophical superiority, because it does attribute to the strong man those virtues which do commonly belong to him, such virtues as laziness and kindness and a rather reckless benevolence, and a great dislike of hurting the weak. Nietzsche, on the other hand, attributes to the strong man that scorn against weakness which only exists among invalids.

It is difficult to say whether or not Chesterton himself had read Nietzsche. His insightful, if impressionistic, understanding of him seems to have been largely a product of his interaction with the "Intelligentsia of the artistic and vaguely anarchic clubs" in London. Regardless of its provenance, it is not difficult to see affinities with Chesterton's reading of Nietzsche and Tolkien's portrayal of 'strength' in *The Lord of the Rings*. See G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton* [The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton; 16] (San Francisco: Ignatius 1988), pp. 152ff.

created participation in the Trinity. Thus I will argue that philology, for Tolkien, is a fundamentally positive science, insofar as it discloses the innate fecundity of ‘ natural’ human formulations and products—a naturality which itself bespeaks a transcendence which cannot be reduced to any material cause. At the same time, I will argue that Tolkien’s taxonomy of culture(s) is indicative of a certain kind of Thomist conception (similarly mediated through other authors or public-house conversations) of human making which renders even pagan culture not Christianity’s antagonistic ‘other’, but instead is itself disclosive in some way of the divine—understood, of course, from the perspective of Catholic Christianity. Tolkien’s ‘response’ to modernity, then, is to re-enshrine narrative, particularly the ‘fairy tale’, as the medium of Christian persuasion to beauty. That is, it is not apodictically that Tolkien seeks make a case for Christianity; rather he ‘argues’ for Christianity by making an appeal to the beautiful in the form of the story, more particularly, in the form of his characters—(pagan) forms which anticipate the form of Christ as the consummate form of the beautiful, the good, and the true. After modernity (or at least, within its death-throes) the Christian appeal is, with a certain element of charm (if not “glamour), to a story that is in some way more attractive because more beautiful, and beautiful because true.

Nietzsche, too, understands modernity as tending towards a kind of nihilism which, similarly, cannot simply be argued out of. For Nietzsche, as for Tolkien, one must appeal to a different conception of the human being in terms of a new narrative, or a different story, an alternative form of being and beauty. Nietzsche similarly refuses the demonstrative in favor, first, of the aphoristic, and later, of the poetic. For him philology renders the limits of intelligibility or credibility of a concept. In other words, Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity is ‘philological’ at the point where he argues that, if one were to ‘get at the root’ of things, to find out what the ‘original’ meaning or concept is behind its various deceptive masks, one would then come either to some retrievable idea or, ultimately, to nothing. Philology is thus an essentially negative science insofar as it undoes or ‘deconstructs’ ‘reality’ and discloses the real as fundamental *chaos*. Yet what remains after the dismantling accomplished by philology is, again, the need for the creative re-construction of *mythos*. The truthfulness of Nietzsche’s account then is proportional to the beauty of his form, which is ultimately that of Zarathustra. Nowhere

is the contrast between Nietzsche and Tolkien is nowhere more stark than in the forms of their two chief poetic creations, Zarathustra and Frodo Baggins.

### *The Sacramentality of Sub-Creation*

What does all of this have to do, then, with “Reading Tolkien and Living the Virtues”?<sup>9</sup> There are others who have devoted themselves in this collection to the examination of particular moral virtues within *The Lord of the Rings*; I am concerned here with just one, though really only a “virtue” by accident—that which, according to Thomas Aquinas is *recta ratio factibilium*, “right reason about things to be made”, namely, Art. In Article 57 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas famously distinguishes *Art* from *Prudence*. Art “has the nature of a virtue”, but is, properly speaking, an “operative habit.”<sup>10</sup> Art is “right reason about things to be made”, while Prudence is “right reason about things to be done.” Nevertheless art “is called a virtue” because it has a relation to the good. Yet it is not perfect virtue “because it does not make its possessor to use it well.”<sup>11</sup> The correlative distinction between making and doing, or *praxis* and *poiesis*, is as old as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, which suggest that *poiesis* is an activity which extends to an external object, while *praxis* is an activity which remains within the agent. Thus art is not a perfect virtue, because, as *poiesis*, its activity passes into an external object, and does not, like prudence, concern the good of the artist, but only the good of the thing made. Of course, for Aquinas, “art does not presuppose rectitude of the appetite” since prudence concerns *praxis*. Nonetheless, art has to do with the goodness of the thing made— and even the imprudent produce good art. Of course by extension, even imprudent pagans are capable

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<sup>9</sup> The title of the Lilly Seminar which gave birth to this collection.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, tr. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics 1981), I-II-II.57.3, *resp.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, ad 1.

of such works, because, it seems, of the gratuity which pertains to the act of making itself, which is an activity proper to mankind alone (to this notion I will return shortly).

Aquinas, perhaps somewhat notoriously, is nonetheless evasive when it comes to any explicit account of beauty, but this is in part because, in spite being one of the transcendentals, beauty did not become a discrete object of study until the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, there is most certainly a peculiarly Thomistic ‘aesthetics’, as evidenced by Umberto Eco and others, but this must be in some sense gleaned from his work, since he nowhere treats it in the same way he treats ‘the good’ and ‘the true’.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the case, Tolkien, while not straightforwardly ‘Thomist’, is quite clearly, like Flannery O’Connor, at least “a Thomist thrice-removed”. This is evident in the way in which the human activity of *poiesis* is explicitly bound up with creation, particularly in the sense that all human making reflects the gratuity of the creation itself, and forms not a discrete set of activities of an agency of purely human propriety, but rather participates in the divine creation itself.

Of course, the early twentieth century marked a revival of interest in Thomas Aquinas, in the wake of the papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris* and the Leonine revival of scholastic thought within Catholic schools. Needless to say, a place like the King Edward VI School in Birmingham was not likely to be the locus of such a renewed interest in Aquinas, but the story at the nearby Birmingham Oratory, established in 1849 by John Henry Newman, was surely a different one. The most formative elder influence on Tolkien’s boyhood was Father Francis Morgan, priest of the Oratory. One can only, again, speculate on the influence of a figure like Aquinas on someone like Tolkien, but in any case there is no doubt that some kind of mediated Thomism was certainly in the air Tolkien breathed—delivered, perhaps, through the pipe-bowl. Perhaps the metaphor is apt—Tolkien’s extra-philological influences seem to have been, so to speak, tobacco- or ale-mediated through the conversations in pubs, drawing-rooms, college quarters (not to mention letters) which were so formative on his imagination. Whatever the case, this informal reception of Aquinas in early-twentieth century Britain was to have profound implications for the development of what one might call a “lay Thomism”, particularly

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<sup>12</sup> cf. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard 1988).



in that area where Thomas' own treatment was so oblique, but which proved a most fertile ground for the sowing of Thomas' thought: the arts.

The larger cultural world in which early-twentieth century English Catholicism found itself was of course an uncongenial one, as even the resistance to traces of 'Romanism' figures like Stewart Headlam, the idiosyncratic Anglo-Catholic socialist priest, encountered during the period, even among Anglicans with quite deep catholic sentiments. The scene must have been altogether more difficult for those of Roman Catholic subscription, like Tolkien's mother, Mabel, whose martyrial death J.R.R. Tolkien attributed to the persecution and poverty brought on by her genuine Catholic devotion. 13

Nonetheless, the English Catholic world of letters was surely a small one, but remarkably fruitful. And it is entirely likely that Tolkien would have encountered the works of David Jones and Eric Gill, who were both involved in a kind of lay application of Thomistic aesthetics in Ditchling in East Sussex in the early 1920's. 14 Jones, the Welsh Catholic artist, poet, and essayist, is one example of such a lay Thomism in the arts. In a remarkable essay published in 1955 entitled "Art and Sacrament", Jones argues that "the chief mark of man lies in his being capable of the gratuitous". 15 What distinguishes humankind from the animals is not simply that they make objects, but that they make *significant* objects. The human being is, therefore, quintessentially the "sign-maker". 16 Even the beasts make things, such as spider-webs, but their making is always entirely functional, while the making of humans is intransitive. 17 Man is capable of making things that have no 'purpose', things which are not designed for some other end except that of signifying, an activity which cannot simply be subordinated to a form of

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<sup>13</sup> See esp. Letter 267, 9-10 January 1965, *Letters*, pp. 353-4; Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine 1977), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth Ward, *David Jones, Mythmaker* (Manchester: University of Manchester 1983), pp. 31ff.

<sup>15</sup> David Jones, "Art and Sacrament", *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber & Faber 1959), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

usefulness. For Jones, one can make sense of the “somewhat wild, dated and naughty saying to the effect that art is for the sake of art” only if one has the kind of theological anthropology which he attempts to articulate. Art *is* for the sake of art, because, to say that art is for the sake of some other thing is to subordinate it to that dominion of utility which the very doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* confounds from the beginning. God does not make the world for some end, but simply because God is generous. It is the sole prerogative of human beings, then, to make *signa*, because the human being is “unavoidably a sacramentalist and...his works are sacramental in character.”<sup>18</sup>

In Question 44 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas says that “[s]ome things...are both agent and patient at the same time: these are imperfect agents, and to these it belongs to intend, even while acting, the acquisition of something. But it does not belong to the First Agent, Who is agent only, to act for the acquisition of some end; He intends only to communicate His perfection, which is His goodness; while every creature intends to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness.”<sup>19</sup> The centerpiece of Thomas’ account of human making is the divine gratuity, in which human beings analogically participate in any act of making. The act of creation belongs to God alone,<sup>20</sup> and bodies cannot, strictly speaking, “create”, because their making always acts on already-existing matter, to which it gives accidental form. And, Thomas stresses (contrary to some tendencies in twentieth century theology), “to create belongs to God according to His being, that is, His essence, which is common to the three Persons. Hence to create is not proper to any one Person, but is common to the whole Trinity.”<sup>21</sup> Human beings, then, cannot create, but they can compose.<sup>22</sup> Thomas alludes here to the notion of *concreation*—although his discussion seems to tend specifically to nature, one can speak of the human agent as “concreating”

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST* Ia.44.4, *resp.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 45.5 *resp.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 45.6, *resp.*

<sup>22</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 173-9.

with God in any human making. Any act of human *poiesis*, then, is a participation the creative agency of God—an act which is nevertheless ‘creation’ by analogy, insofar as human beings are, analogically speaking, ‘self-subsistent beings’.

In a recent book, Denys Turner argues, in a quite different, but entirely related context, that there is a profound link between the “logic of the incarnation” to the ‘sacramental shape’ of human reason specifically, but more generally to the “quasi-sacramental” character of creation itself. He writes,

That creation in its own character as creation has a quasi-sacramental form is there in Hugh of St. Victor, who concedes a certain general sense in which the words of Scripture, but also all creation, being in both cases ‘signs of something sacred’, may be called ‘sacraments’. It is there in Bonaventure, for whom Christ’s human nature, being the *rĚsumĚ* of all creation, and so a *minor mundus* incorporating all the meaning and reality of the *maior mundus*, is the explicit ‘sacrament’ of the world’s implicit created sacramentality. But it is there in a form most significant for the purposes of my argument in Thomas, who argues that anything at all in the sensible world is a sign of something sacred, and so in a general sense is a ‘sacrament’ even if, other than in the cases of the seven sacraments of the Christian dispensation, they lack the character of a sacrament in the strict sense, for only those seven are ‘causes’ of our sanctification...The connection of thoughts between creation’s power to disclose God and its possessing in a general sense the form of the sacramental is in Thomas incontestable. 23

Now perhaps we can better understand why Jones says that “the Christian religion is committed to Ars in the most explicit, compelling, and integral manner.” 24 Moreover, he says, “No wonder then that Theology regards the body as a unique good. Without body: without sacrament. Angels only: no sacrament. Beasts only: no sacrament. Man:

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<sup>23</sup> Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: CUP 2004), pp. 224-5.

<sup>24</sup> David Jones, “Art and Sacrament”, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 167.

sacrament at every turn and all levels of the ‘profane’ and ‘sacred’, in the trivial and in the profound, no escape from sacrament.”<sup>25</sup>

It seems to me that a certain sacramental semiology is at work behind the theory of art and human making that Jones articulates, and which is also operative, in a more oblique way, in Tolkien. All poetry, Jones writes, “is to be diagnosed as ‘dangerous’ because it evokes and recalls, is a kind of *anamnesis* of, i.e. is an effective recalling of, something loved. In that sense it is inevitably ‘propaganda’, in that any real formal expression propagands the reality which caused those forms and their content to be.”<sup>26</sup> Thus in an analogous sense, all art, as *signum*, “re-presents” and renders its object “really present” under the form of paint, or verse, or other medium. Jones’ richly allusive and incredibly dense epic poem, *The AnathŽmata*, is an example of precisely this kind of poetic activity. As a product of human *poiesis*, it is a kind of oblation of *anathŽmata*, in John Chrysostom’s sense of “things laid up from other things”:

the blessed things that have taken on what is cursed and the profane things that somehow are redeemed: the delights and also the ‘ornaments’, both in the primary sense of gear and paraphernalia and in the sense of what simply a dorns; the donated and votive things, the things dedicated after whatever fashion, the things in some sense made separate, being ‘laid up from other things’; things, or some aspect of them, that partake of the extra-utile and of the gratuitous; things that are the signs of something other, together with those signs that not only have the nature of a sign, but are themselves, under some mode, what they signify. Things set up, lifted up, or in whatever manner made over to the gods. <sup>27</sup>

As created things, these objects are intelligible and beautiful in so far as they are “laid up”, offered as oblations to God. What is Jones’ claim here but that “All things desire God as their end, when they desire some good thing, whether this be intellectual or sensible or natural, *i.e.*, without knowledge; because nothing is good and desirable except

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> David Jones, “Preface to *The Anathemata*”, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 118.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

forasmuch as it participates in the likeness to God”? 28 (The significance of this concept for Tolkien’s understanding of paganism is, as I will show, profound.)

*The Anathemata* then is a kind of re-presentation of things lost, things discarded or ignored in the cultural heritage of Western Christendom which Jones perceived to be rapidly vanishing. It is the recovery of an actual, once living vocabulary, the common property of Europe and its descendants. In this sense, Jones attempts to restore a lost world and the grammar from which it is indivisible, while Tolkien, for his part, invents new ones that, in some sense, act as a kind of medium through which those *anathēmata* may be recovered in all their newness. 29

This is partly due to the fact that those ‘offerings’ are not our own, but are received as gifts. Not simply gifts *for us*, but gifts to themselves and to the rest of creation. In other words, the things of this world are not simply there just for our use, but have a kind of subsistence in themselves which does not require a kind of human legitimation of their existence. As Tolkien suggests, the created order is utterly gratuitous, in a way that grants to the objects of the world their proper dignity and freedom as unique singulars in their own right:

As for ‘other things’ their value resides in themselves: they ARE, they would exist even if we did not. But since we do exist one of their functions is to be contemplated by us. If we go up the scale of being to ‘other living things’, such as, say, some small plant, it presents shape and organization: a ‘pattern’ recognizable (with variation) in its kin and offspring; and that is deeply interesting, because these things are ‘other’ and we did not make them, and they seem to proceed from a fountain of invention incalculably richer than our own. 30

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST Ia.44.4, ad 3*.

<sup>29</sup> I am indebted here to discussions with Alison Milbank.

<sup>30</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter 340, to Camilla Unwin, 20 May 1969, *Letters*, p. 399.

What is the implication of all this? As I hope is becoming clear, I want to suggest that without the doctrine of the creation, understood as the generous and gratuitous bringing into being of all that is and all that appears, in and through the Word who becomes flesh and dwells among us, the world itself disappears. In other words, in losing the incarnation, we lose the world. This is not a question then of the created order over and against God, as it is in Nietzsche (get rid of God, recover man), but rather that without the sense of the sacramental order of creation, the things of this world themselves lose their inherent dignity as irreducible singulars. When Aquinas says that “all things desire God” he means not just rational creatures, but quite literally *all things*. Tolkien might add that this includes our own sub-creations: for is not God “the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves”?<sup>31</sup> Yet what makes human beings unique in the order of creatures is that they ‘collaborate with God in making’.<sup>32</sup> This is not to arrogate to the human creature some idolatrous status which is beyond her appointed lot; rather, only the Christian gospel can say to us “Let your works shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father Who is in heaven,”<sup>33</sup> and to us, as well as to the works of our hands, “become what you are”.<sup>34</sup>

How does Jones’ account of human sign-making help us to understand Tolkien’s own treatment of a similar theme, that of story-telling, specifically the “fairy-story”? In the first instance, Tolkien says that “[t]he mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey into gold, and the still rock into swift water.”<sup>35</sup> Such adjectives (“there is no spell or incantation in Fa’rie more potent”<sup>36</sup>) are irreducibly human artifacts, and like all

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<sup>31</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 156. It matters little whether or not elves “actually exist”—to ask the question might already reveal a crude materialism at work already in one’s notion of “existence”, not to mention “actuality”.

<sup>32</sup> David Jones, “Art and Democracy”, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 5.16, as Augustine cites it in *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: CUP 1998), V.14, p. 215.

<sup>34</sup> A gloss on *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 122.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

human products, they go out from their makers and assume a kind of rich and extended sense which surpasses even the intentions of the inventor. As such they are *remembered* concepts whose life is sustained by their constant use, however various. This use is, though, according to certain ‘rules’, and it is of the nature of Fa‘rie to suspend, as it were, those rules. But in that suspension they image the con-creative character of human making.

However, the human power is to mix and transpose these predicates to different objects: “we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood” and transfer those descriptors to things with which they are not ‘naturally’ associated, such as putting “a deadly green on a man’s face” and thereby producing a “horror”. Yet the ability to wield such an “enchanter’s power” does not mean that it will always be well-exercised. Regardless, when one exercises this ability, one nonetheless partakes of something distinctly human—she makes signs. As Tolkien says, “in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Fa‘rie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.”<sup>37</sup>

This is reminiscent of the account St. Augustine gives as an example of a *vestigium trinitatis* in *De Trinitate* XI, where he describes three capacities of the soul: memory, sight and the will. The limits of knowledge are set by the memory—in Tolkien’s case, “green” and “face”—as the limits of sense are established by bodies. But the will can unite these two, and make a green face, and therefore produce horror. As Augustine says,

So I remember is as I have seen [the sun], but I think of it moving as I wish or standing still where I wish, or coming from where I wish or going where I wish. It is easy for me to think of it square though I remember it round, and of any color at all, though I have never seen a green sun and therefore do not remember anything else. <sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, tr. Edmund Hill, OP (Brooklyn, New York: New City 1991), XI.13, p. 314.

Of course, for Augustine this is a complicated matter, and may often incline us to falsehood, but the least one can say is that the ability of the will of the imagination to compose from the matter of memory and sight (however rightly or wrongly-ordered) is an indication of the creature's ontological participation in the Trinity.

Tolkien is no less skeptical of the mind's propensity for idolatry than Augustine, but he extends Augustine's logic by suggesting that "[a]n essential power of Fa'rie is ...the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy'." 39 The will can in principle bring to intelligibility an object, or even a world, which has no "correspondent" in the "real world". This seems to be because, as a certain reading of Augustine would bear out, reality is not simply the world as we perceive it, because it is not yet what it is or will be. Its surfaces are far more complex and significant than a single gaze can capture.

"Has anyone ever seen a black swan?" asks Augustine. "So no one remembers one. But is there anyone who cannot think of one?" 40 And one can also think of elves, dwarves, and wizards, but these are, like any poetic creation, not repetitions of a univocal form but re-presentations of a form of beauty which is infinite in its variety, because eternally simple. That is to say, one cannot re-duce the products of the imagination back to an original type, because 1) original types do not exist, and 2) types are themselves only anticipations of their fulfillment. So the imagination of such poetic forms is that "aspect of 'mythology' proper to fallen humanity which Tolkien names "sub-creation", as opposed to "either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world." 41

### *The Glamour of Poesis*

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<sup>39</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", p. 122.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, XI.14, p. 315.

<sup>41</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", p. 122.



In “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” Tolkien argues that most contemporary critics of the poem, besotted by its ostensible “historical” value as a source of information for the Anglo-Saxon age, have missed the fact that, as he writes, “the illusion of historical truth” in *Beowulf* is “largely a product of Art.” It seems that Tolkien here means “illusion” not in the modern, pejorative sense which is also given to “myth”, but rather in its etymological origin in *in-ludere*, to be “in-play”.<sup>42</sup> Thus this “illusion of historical truth” in *Beowulf* is not simply a matter of a jesting veil that must be somehow vanquished by the critic in order to arrive at the historical kernel, but is in fact one of those “peculiar poetic virtues” of the poem itself. In that sense, a crude historicism actually robs history of its own inherently illusory quality, rendering to it in fact a *less* trustworthy status as history. The “illusion of historical truth” is therefore dangerous because it in fact may disclose a truth which is *more than* historical, and even history, for Tolkien, “often resembles ‘Myth’, because they are both ultimately of the same stuff.”<sup>43</sup> Tolkien, as is well-known, evinces a suspicion of historical-critical methods in philological literary criticism that takes it as axiomatic that there is some ‘essence’ to which one could reduce a poem. But the danger in such methods is that it treats a poetic creation as an instrument, a thing which can be mined or reduced to *some other thing*, or a story which can be turned into some use. It is ultimately a rejection of the work of art as an irreducible act in itself, which is in a sense its own end. In other words, in a profound sense, such a version of philology takes the ‘fun’ out of literature because it removes from it the fundamental element of play. And play, like contemplation, strictly speaking serves no purpose external to itself. Thus Tolkien concludes that “[t]he lovers of poetry can safely study the art, but the seekers after history must beware lest *the glamour of Poesis* overcome them.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon 1950), p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 127.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

This last turn of phrase is central to what Tolkien understands by what he elsewhere calls “linguistic aesthetics”.<sup>45</sup> “Glamour”, according to the *OED*, is a corruption of “grammar”—the accidental relation between these two as concerns philology as a “love of words” is perhaps not so accidental—which was allegedly introduced by Sir Walter Scott in the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Yet at this point the *OED* ceases to be of much help, as Shippey shows, insofar as in the 1972 Supplement “concedes the point and adds the coinages ‘glamourize’, ‘glammed-up’, and even ‘glam’ (a word Tolkien would have especially hated as showing that the old word used in dialect and in *Sir Gawain* for ‘mirth, merriment’, *glam*, *glaum*, was so dead as to be no competitor.” Thus in original parlance the term suggested something like “the opposite of ‘shrewdness’”<sup>47</sup>—in other words, mirth, merriment, or play, even, which does have the capacity to draw forth our attraction.

What then, is the “glamour of Poesis”? In “On Fairy-Stories” Tolkien also invokes the notion of “the glamour of Elfland” which has been transformed into “mere finesse” in so much of the “flower-and-butterfly” daintiness of some post-rationalist literature. What is it about Elfland that is so “glamorous”? Shippey writes that “the quality [Tolkien] evidently valued more than anything in literature was that shimmer of suggestion which never quite becomes clear sight but always hints at something deeper further on.” Fa’rie is, for Tolkien, characterized as a kind of “primal desire”: “the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder”<sup>48</sup> and “the desire

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Letter 131, to Milton Waldman, *Letters*, p. 143.

<sup>46</sup> “There is a better word, though buried in Tolkien’s remarks, which I can only conclude he decided not to discuss as being too complicated for a non-philological piece; he would have done better to focus on it. This is ‘glamour’. Actually Tolkien may also have been too revolted by the semantic poisonings of modernity to want to discuss the word, for now in common parlance it means overwhelmingly the aura of female sexual attraction, or to be more exact female sexual attraction *at a distance*—a showbiz word, an advertiser’s word, false and meretricious, taking a part in such nasty compounds as ‘glamour-girl’, ‘glamour-puss’, and even ‘glamour-pants’.” Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 116.

of men to hold communion with other living things.” 49 Indeed, Tolkien says, reflecting on his own childhood, that the successful fairy-story is one which awakens desire. 50

It is precisely that sense of “glamour” which, as alluring playfulness or merriment, is what characterizes Faërie in general as the site in which the possibility of “communion with other living things”, which is precisely an eschatological hope in the restoration of creation, becomes as it were “reality”. Of course, this is only escapism in the sense of an escape from imprisonment. It is only escape if one means by that something like ‘liberation’.

Faërie also makes possible a kind of “literary” or “Secondary belief” which, in contrast to Coleridge’s dictum that it requires a “willing suspension of disbelief”, suggests that the world of Faërie is not “false” but “true”, in the sense that it operates according to rules of play which, when violated, return one to the “Primary World”. Only then can Faërie be entertained in suspended disbelief, because there emerges a boundary across which one looks into the “Secondary World”—one is no longer “within”. This is analogous to what Huizinga has to say about play, in a passage to which I have already referred:

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport’. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. 51

This is precisely what happens when one “pretends” at Faërie: by his disbelief he destroys the world of Faërie itself and causes it to fail. It must be said here that what Huizinga means by ‘play’ and what Tolkien means by Faërie are not at all the same as “a frivolous indulgence in pointless triviality”, but rather constitute a fundamental

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>51</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 11

characteristic of humanity as such. In Tolkien's case, fairy-stories are "a natural human taste (though not necessarily a universal one)." 52

So the world of fairy-stories is true, but not simply in a "metaphorical" sense. The denigration of the "secondary" linguistic world of Faërie is analogous to a modern deprecation of metaphor as mere ornamentation. For, as Janet Soskice has shown, what in the wake of such historicism has come to be called 'metaphorical truth' is not simply a chimera or mere fancy. For example, "We may warn someone, 'Watch out! That's a live wire', but even if we think wires are not literally 'live' we do not add 'but of course that is only metaphorically true'." 53 The same principle seems to apply to fairy-stories, which, similarly, cannot be told with that same caveat without violating the rules of Faërie to begin with. In other words, it adds nothing to say of elves that they are true *in a sense*, any more than it does to say of this world that it exists *in a sense*. For both claims are true, but not because they simply correspond to a reality 'out there'. Rather, the existence of Faërie is, like the existence of the 'primary world', analogical, because being itself, as David Burrell and others have shown, is analogical. 54

Because of the analogical structure of creation itself, the things of this world are, in a certain sense, "consonant" with each other. And perhaps the metaphor is apt, since Tolkien confesses to W.H. Auden that he intended *The Lord of the Rings* not to "fit with formalized Christian theology", but rather to render it "consonant with Christian thought and belief." 55 It is worth remembering here the crucial image of creation as original music in *The Silmarillion*. It is this sense of "consonance" which explains why the pagan

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<sup>52</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", p. 136. Tolkien's distinction between "natural" and "universal" seems to be a bit questionable, unless one understands this, as he seems to, as the difference between a desire that is natural to humanity in general and its appearance or realization in practice among all human persons, in just the same way as there may be a "natural aptitude for knowledge" in human beings, but that is not their "necessary" state.

<sup>53</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP 1985), p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> See David Burrell, "From the Analogy of 'Being' to the Analogy of Being", in *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 2004), pp. 113-26; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 241ff; Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (London: Routledge 2003), pp. 181-9.

<sup>55</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter 269, to W.H. Auden, 12 May 1965, *Letters*, p. 355.

world of *Beowulf* is not Christianity's "other", because it is a world which for Tolkien is groping after the truth which in itself can never be possessed, yet that noble human longing characteristic of pagan antiquity is nevertheless the occasion of, if not quite pity, at least mourning. In any event, because the creation—which includes all human sub-creations as well as works of nature—is created by God and sustained by participation in God, the creation is therefore imbued with a graced musicality which, for all its cacophonous disharmony, is capable of intimations of a transcendent harmonic likeness. As Tolkien writes, "It is this deeper likeness which makes things, that are either the inevitabilities of human poetry or the accidental congruences of all tales, ring alike." 56 Thus a poem like *Beowulf* is enchanting, in its fantastical elements, because it calls forth a likeness, a kind of recognition in the reader of something that cannot easily be thematized, but which nevertheless concerns the *telos* of all human lives. As Tolkien writes in a letter to Deborah Webster, "far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy-story." 57

Hence philology, for Tolkien, is an essentially 'reconstructive' science that deals with the re-discovery or dis-discovery of what Tom Shippey calls "asterisk-reality", a world now lost to us but in a sense available through philological 're-creation'. (One might note here the fortuitous etymological resonances of "re-creation" as a kind of "play", but more on this later.) For Tolkien "[t]his activity of re-creation—creation from philology—lies at the heart of Tolkien's 'invention' (though maybe not of his 'inspiration'); it was an activity which he kept up throughout his life." 58 However nuanced Tolkien's relationship to the disciplinary forms of the practice of philology within academia during the first half of the twentieth-century (forms whose history of development are complicated, as Shippey shows 59), at least by 1947 he regarded its stature as having diminished somewhat, "the noblest of sciences" whose contemporary practice was far from consonant with its historical dignity:

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<sup>56</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf", p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter 213, to Deborah Webster, 25 October 1958, *Letters*, p. 288.

<sup>58</sup> Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, pp. 1-55.

Philology has been dethroned from the high place it once had in this court of inquiry. Max Mÿller's view of mythology as a 'disease of language' can be abandoned without regret. Mythology is not a disease at all, though it may like all human things become diseased. You might as well say that thinking is a disease of the mind. It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology. But Language cannot, all the same, be dismissed. The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. 60

In a famous letter to his American publisher, Tolkien wrote of his own compositions that "a name comes first and the story follows." 61 Is this not precisely the logic of creation? Before all, God creates the world in Genes is by giving it a name. By divine *fiat* God's creating is the same as his naming. In naming 'light' God calls it into being. This is of course reflected in Tolkien's own *enarratio* of Genesis in *The Silmarillion*. And is it not true of all of us? We do not choose our own names any more than we choose our own stories. While we cannot simply 'make up' our own accounts of ourselves, we, as human beings who compose but do not create, must operate with what is given to us. This is not at all a negative limitation; it is precisely the "binding" which marks the fundamentally religious quality of all art—in the sense of *religio*, in its relation to *religare*, "to bind". 62 It is this binding which, according to Jones, "secures a freedom to function." 63 As I have suggested, there is an implicit Thomism to Tolkien's understanding of philology as it seeks not to recover a lost antiquity, but to create an imaginary world in which the aspirations of this world may be glimpsed with greater luminosity.

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<sup>60</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories", pp. 121-2.

<sup>61</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter 165, to the Houghton Mifflin Co., *Letters*, p. 219.

<sup>62</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-IIae 81.1, *resp.*

<sup>63</sup> David Jones, "Art and Sacrament", *Epoch and Artist*, p. 158.

The theologian, as David Hart suggests, must attend to surfaces, which is, after all, “where all things come to pass.”<sup>64</sup> Tolkien’s philological appeal to fairy-stories in a sense partakes of this same attention to surfaces as a counter to the characteristically modern claim that pure ‘essences’ can be known without linguistic mediation—a claim for which Nietzsche too has no small amount of scorn. What one failure of the modern project at least shows for Tolkien is that there can be no possibility of a Cartesian *mathesis universalis* or a Leibnizian *characteristica universalis* intelligible to all rational subjects.<sup>65</sup> Truth itself is storied and not reducible to an atomic moment or concept because Truth is ultimately—and not just ultimately, but before everything else—for Tolkien, triune. It is not enough simply to say that the world is created *ex nihilo* by an eternal ‘simplicity’, but by a Holy Trinity who in its primordial fecundity is not threatened by any kind of ‘original’ violence, strife or chaos. For this reason Tolkien’s ‘creation myth’ in *The Silmarillion* depicts a prior, though learned, harmony among the Ainur.<sup>66</sup> Thus truth resists even any puerile conflation with ‘being’, understood as pure eternal *stasis*. We will see how the implications of truth as eternal self-offering, self-receiving charity render it impossible of colonization or conquest by any single notion of truth as power or violence.

### *How to Philologize with a Hammer*

It is noteworthy that Friedrich Nietzsche was not a professional philosopher. He never held a position in philosophy in his life; in fact in 1871 he made an unsuccessful bid to take up the chair of philosophy at the University of Basel vacated by Gustav Teichmüller late in the previous year.<sup>67</sup> After 1879, when Nietzsche officially resigned his

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<sup>64</sup> David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 28.

<sup>65</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago 1990).

<sup>66</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, pp. 122-5.

professorship of classical philosophy in Basel, he never again held an academic position, but began a decade of extraordinary literary production, in which he wrote *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, *Daybreak*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, two books on Wagner, *The Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*.

Though Nietzsche's activity from 1879 to 1889 was not conducted in the rôle of an academic philologist, his late work illustrates how his own understanding of philology is both broader and narrower than the classical conception of the discipline. During his own lifetime, Nietzsche's relationship to the institutional philological establishment became somewhat acerbic. This is due to the fact that Nietzsche, like some others before him, came to question the very foundations of philological science to begin with. He argued that philology is a modern product whose possibility is ultimately grounded in nothing but itself. In this he was railing against the form of academic philology that sought to 'reconstruct' an illusory antiquity that it could then claim to have 'discovered'.<sup>69</sup> It is not difficult to understand how Nietzsche could see that behind such a practice lay a philological will-to-power.

Yet Nietzsche's argument to this point is itself philological, in the sense that his exposure of the illusory pretensions to authenticity among the contemporary practice of philology was a philological one. Philology, in other words, disclosed philology's own hidden presuppositions. In this sense, the discipline is much broader for Nietzsche than technical etymological genealogy or linguistic reconstruction; it is something more like *Kulturkritik*, "the apprehension of a cultural error" or "a mode of cultural mystification."<sup>70</sup> In that sense, Nietzsche's later work, as James Porter argues, is in keeping with this conception of philology, and his critique of Christianity is the preeminent example of the genealogical unveiling (what later Nietzscheans would rightly

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000), p 8.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.



label ‘de-construction’) of a ‘corruption’. Consider, for example, the following account from *Daybreak*, written in 1881:

*The philology of Christianity.*—How little Christianity educates the sense of honesty and justice can be gauged fairly well from the character of its scholars’ writings: they present their conjectures as boldly as if they were dogmas and are rarely in any honest perplexity over the interpretation of a passage in the Bible. Again and again they say ‘ I am right, for it is written—‘ and then follows an interpretation of such impudent arbitrariness that a philologist who hears it is caught between rage and laughter and asks himself: is it possible? Is this honourable? Is it even decent?—How much dishonesty in this matter is still practised in Protestant pulpits, how grossly the preacher exploits the advantage that no one is going to interrupt him here, how the Bible is pummelled and punched and the art of reading badly is in all due form imparted to the people: only he who never goes to church or never goes anywhere else will underestimate that. 71

For Nietzsche, the philological axe is laid to the root of the tree of Christianity and fells it, by making belief itself unbelievable. To put it another way, philology exposes Christianity as a “fairy tale”. Contra Tolkien, “fairy-tales” represent, for Nietzsche, the world of puerile illusion, and philology can expose Christianity for what it really is: make believe:

“It may be hoped man will raise himself so high that the things previously highest to him, e.g., the belief in God he has held up to now, appear childlike, childish, and touching: indeed, that he will *do again* what he did with all the myths—turn them into children’s stories and fairy-tales.” 72

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<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: CUP 1982), ¶84, p.49.

<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, tr. Kate Sturge [Cambridge Texts in the history of Philosophy] (Cambridge: CUP 2003) ¶39[17], p. 41.

For Nietzsche, “a good philologist (and indeed any philologically trained scholar) is repulsed by false textual interpretations (e.g., those made by the Protestant preachers in the pulpits—which is why the learned professions no longer go to church”.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, Nietzsche eloquently acclaims philology as “that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the *word* which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*.”<sup>74</sup> A noble asceticism attends to Nietzsche’s practice of philology, which for him is very nearly a kind of spiritual discipline. However, “delicate, cautious work” hardly characterizes one who intends to “philosophize with a hammer.” It is above all to the sounding-out of idols that the hammer is put,<sup>75</sup> and no one is a better practitioner of “the hardness of the hammer, the *joy even in destroying*”<sup>76</sup> than the prophet of the *Übermensch* and the eternal recurrence, Zarathustra.

In Nietzsche’s case, all philological re-constructions are expressions of will-to-power, and one must begin by destroying these false idols. The central example of this is the imperative to destroy Christianity in order to erect hyperborean self-overcoming in its place. This is the fundamental logic of Zarathustra: *destroy in order to create*. At the same time, as Stanley Rosen has shown, Nietzsche presents his reader with a noble lie in the exhortation to creativity within an order in which there can be nothing new, but only “the illusory or phenomenal manifestation of the actual or noumenal fluctuations of chaos (i.e., intrinsically random motions of points of force).”<sup>77</sup> In other words, Nietzsche’s is a world in which “there is no creation at all.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 34[48], p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Preface to *Daybreak*, ¶5, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Foreword to *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*”, *Ecce Homo*, ¶8, p. 765.

<sup>77</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment : Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Cambridge: CUP 1995), p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

In 1888 Nietzsche described *Zarathustra* to Karl Knortz as “the profoundest work in the German tongue, and the most perfect in its language.”<sup>79</sup> Whether or not he was right about this slightly delirious claim, there were certainly those in Germany who would later agree with his assessment. Regardless, the figure of Zarathustra is Nietzsche’s hyperborean answer to the “life-denying” form of life promoted by Christianity. Zarathustra is the will-to-power incarnate, a prophet of the eternal recurrence of the same, and the figure in whom Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole finds its fullest expression.

It is interesting to note that Zarathustra is also a response to the nihilism of modernity, insofar as out of the ruins of the modern project must emerge a positive, “Yes-saying” figure, the embodiment of the Dionysian spirit who will offer a way beyond such negations. Yet negation is central to the mission of Zarathustra. As Nietzsche writes of Zarathustra in *Ecce Homo*, “The imperative, ‘become hard!’ the most fundamental certainty *that all creators are hard*, is the distinctive mark of a Dionysian nature.”<sup>80</sup>

It is also curious that Nietzsche would choose the name of Zarathustra for his greatest poetic creation, since Zoroaster was the founder of a pre-Christian dualistic religion which sprang up in Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The Zoroastrian universe is a kind of proto-gnostic one of inherent strife between a god of light and one of darkness. (In that sense, it is not difficult to see why Nietzsche would choose the Persian prophet as his hero’s namesake, and perhaps reveals a latent Gnosticism endemic to Nietzschean nihilism as such (not this; *that*).<sup>81</sup>) Does it not also suggest a fundamentally Nietzschean tactic, ironically, of a kind of recovery of a pure origin? Might not the implicit suggestion be that Judaism and Christianity are themselves corruptions of an originally pure Zoroastrianism which can be redeemed by more forcefully saying “yes” to that particular past, while negating its false images?

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<sup>79</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Letter 171, to Karl Knortz, 21 June 1888, in Christopher Middleton, ed., *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1996), p. 299.

<sup>80</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, *loc. cit.*, p. 765.

<sup>81</sup> Here I am indebted to Conor Cunningham. See his *Genealogy of Nihilism*, esp. his account of nihilism’s ‘castration complex’, pp. 257-8.

In any event, in creating the figure of Zarathustra, Nietzsche appeals to his “charm” as a persuasive form. For example, one of the reasons why Christianity is so un-compelling, according to Zarathustra, is that its human ‘shape’ is so unpersuasive. “They would have to sing better songs to make me believe in their redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!” 82

Therein lies the alleged truthfulness of Zarathustra: he is exactly what he appears. Appearance therefore exhausts reality in the truly hyperborean man. The rest of us can only “become what we are” by shedding the veil of *ressentiment*, of false appearances, and overcoming the self. Zarathustra is also the anti-Christ in the sense that he is the unequivocal aesthetic anti-form of Christ. Whereas Christ, according to Nietzsche, offers the gift of eternal life, Zarathustra offers the gift of eternal recurrence. It is quite clear, as Rosen has shown, that Nietzsche presents Zarathustra as the true alternative to Christ; the gospel of the former is that of creative will which first destroys in order to create. In doing so, Nietzsche is conscious that he is writing a new gospel which lays claim to the true story of being, understood as chaos. It is no accident that Nietzsche’s sworn enemy is Christianity; for whatever the inadequacy of his understanding of Christianity, which is clearly itself no less immune to the contingency of his own form of late-nineteenth-century German Protestantism, the fact remains that in recognizing that his own *mythos* was entirely ‘other’ to the Christian story, he at least registers the sense in which Christianity does indeed represent a *skandalon* to every pagan account of being as strife and of human virtue as heroism. So in this light, Nietzsche rightly establishes the notion of the eternal recurrence as *the* only worthy alternative to the Christian *kerygma*.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin 1969), p. 116.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. my “Theology at Midnight: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Grammar of Atheism”, Cambridge University M.Phil. Thesis (1997); and David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 103: “Nietzsche’s post-Christian counternarrative (which is itself perhaps occasionally tainted by resentment rather than honesty) cannot be denied its power and its appeal, but it should be recognized not simply as critique but as always already another *kerygma*. Between Nietzsche’s vision of life as an agon and the Christian vision of life as creation—as primordial ‘gift’ and ‘grace’—there is nothing (not even the palpable evidences of ‘nature red in tooth and claw’) that makes wither perspective self-evidently more correct than the other. Each sees and accounts for the violence of experience and the beauty of being, but each according to an irreducible *mythos* and a particular aesthetics. A battle of tastes is being waged by Nietzsche, and the metaphysical appears therein as a necessary element of his narrative’s completeness”. See also p. 124f.

The *locus classicus* of the expression of eternal recurrence is found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, “Of the Vision and the Riddle”:

‘Behold this moment!’ I went on. ‘From this gateway Moment a long, eternal lane runs *back*: an eternity lies behind us.

‘Must not all things that *can* run have already run along this lane? Must not all things that *can* happen *have* already happened, been done, run past?’

For Nietzsche, indeed, the “road goes ever on and on”, but it is the road of identical repetition of the same, for ever. One can see how this teaching of Zarathustra is related to his call for the poetic creation. As Stanley Rosen writes of the eternal recurrence,

This belief is compatible with Nietzsche’s paganism, because if Being is Becoming, or in other words if rest is the limit state of motion, and so merely an unusually slow motion, then everything is changing, war is the father of all things, and human existence is nothing but a series of transient interpretations of chaos. Order is just a tentative concatenation of points of force, one that can be retained through an act of will. The instrument for the enactment of will is not philosophical argumentation or scientific discovery but prophetic rhetoric.<sup>84</sup>

Nietzsche writes in *The Twilight of the Idols* that “I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.”<sup>85</sup> It must be incredibly frustrating to be a philologist who wants to get rid of God but can’t because of philology! Yet what I think Nietzsche is onto is not that there is some discernable order or pattern in languages, which bespeaks some kind of intelligence at work in the human species—as if it remained in some way as a kind of implicit proof of God’s existence.<sup>86</sup> The

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<sup>84</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, p. 14.

<sup>85</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 48.

<sup>86</sup> Tolkien himself does seem to have been prone to such “reasoning to God” through the observation of ‘patterns’. See letter 310, to Camilla Unwin, 20 May 1969, Letters, p. 399f.

inescapability of language points to an insight which is rendered positively in Tolkien's account.

Nietzsche's is an attempt, paradoxically, to articulate the 'goal' of human life as to repeat identically the Dionysian in the form of Zarathustra. As such, the form of Zarathustra is entirely univocal—it can only be finitely repeated in the same way, without real difference:

I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, this serpent—not to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things. 87

To become like Zarathustra is to reproduce a single way of being at every instant—destroy, create. Zarathustra, unlike the form of Christ, is impatient of variation; one can only be like this, the form of Dionysus can only eternally recur—identically, always.

In any case, at the risk of giving far too short shrift to an incredibly nuanced and sophisticated account in Nietzsche's work, one can conclude that in the figure of Zarathustra, Nietzsche offers an alternative poetic form of life to the form of the Christ of Christianity (which Nietzsche understood as an invention of St. Paul). The crucial point here that Nietzsche's confrontation with Christianity is conducted entirely on aesthetic grounds, and his critique of it operates at the level of "taste". For that reason, he says, "[t]he critic of Christianity cannot be spared the task of making Christianity *contemptible*." 88 In this sense, Nietzsche, as Hart writes, "understood that Christian truth depends first upon a story, and so to meet his critique of Christianity tellingly (so to put it), one must engage it on the field of rhetoric, persuasion, and aesthetic evaluation first, and not that of 'historical science' or the discourses of 'disinterested' reason." As I have been suggesting, this recognition is precisely why Tolkien's imagination of Middle

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<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Convalescent", *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 237-8.

<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, ¶57, p. 188.

Earth is best understood as an appeal to the beauty of Christ through the similarly poetic forms of his sub-creation. To this I will return shortly, but in the meantime, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche's mythopoetic invention is, like Tolkien's, premised upon the centrality of *mythos* for the *polis*, and both figures are concerned about the sufficiency and availability of the mythological apparatus in their respective cultures. On the one hand, Tolkien ventured to bequeath to England a mythological treasury which it lacked; on the other, Nietzsche saw the re-inauguration of a similarly German *mythos* as essential to the renewal of the "German spirit". Both therefore recognized the indissociability of politics from myth, but for different reasons and with very different outcomes.

### *A New Myth for Germany?*

Nietzsche's late, and largely critical, comments on Martin Luther mark a significant change of tone from his earlier sanguinity about the German nation and the possibilities for a renewal of its best traits, counting Luther among the "sublime champions on this way" to triumph. This later suspicion of German-ness had, of course, a great deal to do with the breakdown of his relationship with Richard Wagner, whose increasing nationalism Nietzsche found distasteful. However, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he had written:

We think so highly of the pure and vigorous core of the German character that we dare to expect of it above all others this elimination of the forcibly implanted foreign elements, and consider it possible that the German spirit will return to itself...But let him never believe that he could fight ...without the gods of his house, or his mythical home, without 'bringing back' all German things! And if the German should hesitantly look around for a leader who might bring him back again into his long lost home whose ways and paths

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he scarcely knows anymore, let him merely listen to the ecstatically luring call of the Dionysian bird that hovers above him and wants to point the way for him. 89

As is typical, Nietzsche is difficult to pin down in terms of his relationship to Luther—on the one hand he viewed him (at least in 1872) as in a sense identical with the ‘German spirit’, but later viewed in just the opposite light, as the destroyer of the Dionysian element in German culture. Moreover, he had, in the same section, claimed:

So deep, courageous, and spiritual, so exuberantly good and tender did this chorale of Luther sound—as the first Dionysian luring call breaking forth from dense thickets at the approach of spring. And in competing echoes the solemnly exuberant procession of Dionysian revelers responded, to whom we are indebted to German music—and to whom we shall be indebted for *the rebirth of German myth*. 90

It may be that Nietzsche later lost the hope that the home to which the ‘new leader’ would bring his followers was in fact Germany, but it is plain that the ‘Dionysian bird’ who ‘points the way’ beyond the nihilism of the rotting Protestant corpse is Zarathustra. Whatever the intentions of its author, it is also clear that *Also sprach Zarathustra* did in fact become ‘a new myth for Germany’—at least a ‘Germany’ mythologically ill-conceived—when, in 1935, “a handsomely bound copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*...had been solemnly placed, alongside *Mein Kampf* and Alfred Rosenberg’s *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, in the vault of the Tannenberg Memorial (commemorating the Germans’ decisive victory over the Russians in the autumn of 1914) as one of the three ideological pillars of Germany’s *Third Reich*. 91

It is difficult to imagine Tolkien’s “new myth for England” inspiring anything like an Empire (much less a *Reich*), since *The Lord of the Rings* is animated by a deliberately

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<sup>89</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ¶23, pp.138-9.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>91</sup> The concluding passage of Curtis Cate’s recent biography, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook 2002), p. 576.



anti-imperial spirit and celebrates all off those virtues which Nietzsche found so hideous: pity, mercy, charity. At the very least, Tolkien's creation is, even unlike most fairy-tales, a story of failure. It is an account of the irretrievability of a lost past whose loss threatens every present. Tolkien of course regarded "Britain" as a conceptual Leviathan whose imperial pretensions would mean the dissolution of anything peculiarly English. As Nicholas Boyle argues, *The Lord of the Rings* then stands as a critique of British cultural *amnesia*. "And a critique it must be, for a historical parallel to the success of Frodo's quest could only be, not the triumph of Britain, but its self-immolation—the dissolution of the empire and of everything built on the act over four centuries old by which England ceased to be Catholic and became Britain, a willed rejection of all the features of modernity that made mid-twentieth-century British society possible." 92 Modern Britain, argues Boyle, is "defined by what it has forgotten"—an example of the displacement of analogical *anamnesis* as the central constitutive activity of the *polis*.

It is entirely noteworthy in this context that the story of *The Lord of the Rings* begins and ends in the same place: The Shire. 93 The story, like *The Hobbit*, is an account of a journey and a return, and *exitus* and a *reditus*, but in a very important way the *The Lord of the Rings* narrates very differently than does *The Hobbit* the kind of return and the place to which one returns. The Shire of "The Long-Expected Party" is not at all the same as the scoured Shire to which the hobbits return. Now bereft of the Party Tree, neither the Shire nor Frodo are the same they were when the Fellowship first departed. The Party Tree proves to be the central token of Hobbiton's memory. One might wonder here to what extent Tolkien signals the loss of genuine festivity as the dangerous consummation of modernity and that which threatens our future. "*The Lord of the Rings* is not just the story of hobbits venturing out to discover the greater world to which the Shire belongs. It is also the story of the greater world breaking in on The Shire, potentially with annihilating consequences." 94 The hobbits return to The Shire to

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<sup>92</sup> Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures A Catholic Approach to Literature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame 2005), pp. 255-6.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 248-66.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 262.

find it changed forever, irreparably damaged and effaced and threatened with the loss of its own memory—not as nostalgia, but as *anamnesis*, that (analogous) activity which renders all human activity significant because is the possibility of the past returning to us again and again, ever new. “The Shire, like Middle Earth in its state of decline, and indeed like modern England, is defined by what it has forgotten, and the hobbits’ great expedition into the world to which the Shire belongs is a reawakening that will redefine the home from which they started.”<sup>95</sup>

To return to the previous point about the aesthetic shape of Christianity in the post-Christian age, it is impossible to know whether or not Tolkien had Nietzsche in mind when constructing Middle-Earth; but it is clear that Tolkien’s world is every bit as anti-Zarathustran as Nietzsche’s is anti-Christian. For here there is a particularly Christian vision which illuminates an entirely pagan world, though one not bereft of an intimation of something *more than pagan*. Tolkien, curiously, draws attention to the allure of Christian imagination by coloring a world in which there is no mention of Christ whatsoever, much less of overt religiosity. It is, oddly enough, by depicting paganism, so to speak, *sub specie aeternitatis*, that he is able to appeal to the ‘glamour’ of Christ. In other words, Christianity is here re-imagined, not “under the form of paint”, but “under the form of hobbits”, and it is to the aesthetic ‘shape’ of such creatures that I now turn.

### *The Virtues of Hobbiton*

In contrast to the univocal identity which eternal recurrence is condemned to repeat, Tolkien’s Middle-Earth survives the terrorism of Mordor because of, and in a multiplicity of forms: Men, Elves, Ents, Dwarves, Wizards, and Hobbits. No single form of life is adequate as a representation of virtue—the moral shape of Middle-Earth is not simply identical with the hobbitic, but is a function of a Fellowship. The form of Christ is like this: it is not identical with any single human life, but is productive of an endless variety of lives whose different shapes form the “communion of saints” (and this is perhaps at least an indication of why the lives of the saints are so essential to Christian

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid*, p. 260.

self-understanding). So in a sense there is a valid opposition: Zarathustra, or the lives of the saints. They are both poetic forms, in the imitation of which consists (or does not) our good as human beings. Zarathustra can of course be argued against on points of the philosophical coherence of his doctrines, but this is not why Nietzsche presents him in the way that he does. What I have been calling his ‘form’ is but the irreducible quality or shape of his life as an object of aesthetic delight and persuasion. On those grounds he cannot simply be rejected but must, as it were, be “out-narrated”.

Similarly, the lives of the folk of Middle-Earth are not “allegorical” in the sense Tolkien always derided, as if the Men simply *stood for* “courage” or the Wizards for “wisdom” or some such univocal representational scheme. There are indeed virtues peculiar to each, and even some virtues which may be higher than others, but the characters are not hypostases of such virtues. At the same time, there is something peculiar to hobbits which makes them particularly well-suited to the mission to destroy the Ring, and there is ample reason to suspect it lies in their playfulness, in the fact that, as John Milbank points out, they “are both brave and cunning *because* they prize naïve festivity above the dwarfish interest in accumulation and preservation.”<sup>96</sup> In some ways, what makes the hobbits, for Tolkien, worthy of imitation (and also at times prone to deception) is their ludic virtuosity, their dexterity in play.

This is why the ending of *The Return of the King* is so profound: Sam returns home with an ironic “I’m back” to a hot meal already prepared and waiting for him. The Party Tree has been replanted and is already showing some promising growth, and yet the Shire is not at all the same. He *is* back because he recognizes that what the new situation calls for is not nostalgic recovery but *anamnesic* re-creation, in which the Shire is ‘raised’ again—not just as it was, but differently. In fact it is not yet what it will be. And just as for Sam, the meal goes ever on before us, patient of our delight.

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<sup>96</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1997), p. 232, n. 16. As evidence of this Milbank points to *The Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1966, 1994), p. 260: “All the same Mr. Baggins kept his head more clear of the bewitchment of the hoard than the dwarves did. Long before the dwarves were tired of examining the treasures, he became weary of it and sat down on the floor; and he began to wonder nervously what the end of it all would be. ‘I would give a good many of these precious goblets,; he thought, ‘for a drink of something cheering out of one of Beorn’s wooden bowls!’”

### *Recurrence, Repetition, and Redemption*

Curiously, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity has made possible such a re-imagination of its own story, and Tolkien's may be one such instance of this. Indeed, he has "bequeathed Christian thought a most beautiful gift, a needed anamnesis of itself—of its strangeness."<sup>97</sup> The poetic form of Zarathustra recalls the truly unclassifiable quality of the form of Christ and how his entire "shape"—the indissoluble totality of the whole of his begetting of the Father before all worlds, his birth, infancy, ministry, death and resurrection and ascension which is not isolable in a concept but only available as a story told and re-told— confounds the pagan tale of everlasting chaos. Tolkien's own pagan sub-creations perform a similar anamnestic recollection of Christianity's peculiarity in the form of hobbits—creatures which do not exactly fit into any pre-existing list, not even the Entish catalog of beings.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, hobbitic festivity is really the only form of virtue that stands the best chance of resisting the will of Sauron. Men, even wizards, are prey to the temptations to *use* the ring, to attempt to reorient it to a utility to which the Ring itself refuses to submit. It is however an evil object because it represents the abolition of play, the conscription of all being to usefulness, particularly in the way in which those who try to use the Ring only end up being used *by it*. But the hobbits more than anyone else recognize that it is used at one's peril, and above all the Ring is so sinister because it is a thing that *cannot be enjoyed*.

What is the One Ring, then, but an image of Zarathustran of eternal recurrence? Unlike the other rings made by the elves, the One Ring is unadorned with any gemstone. It is a perfect unbroken circle, unaffected by the accidents of heat or external force, impervious even to the will of its bearer. It is, moreover, an image of false eternity—the identical repetition of all things with no beginning and no end. At the same time, as a symbol of evil, the Ring circumscribes a non-space, a pure privation. The essence of the Ring is its nothingness. This is why, at the end of *The Return of the King*, the Ring must

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<sup>97</sup> David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 126.

<sup>98</sup> See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1994), p. 453.

be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom, its source and origin. The Ring must return to its origin—thus effecting a *reditus* to its source which is a parody of the divine cosmological *reditus* of creation in the sense that the source and end of the Ring is consuming fire. But even this fire is mortal and will one day flame out to embers, so that The Ring is, paradoxically, defeated by that which it cannot promise to anyone: death.

One might add to this that the ring, as eternal recurrence, is so diabolical is not because it promises immortality but because it cancels mortality itself, and in canceling death it obviates life. The One Ring, then is the consummate token of nihilistic discourse in that it makes death a nothing, but makes it too disappear. The worst thing about the Ring is that it can't even kill you, because it has already taken away from you even your death.<sup>99</sup> As Gandalf says to Frodo of the Great Rings:

A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he *fades*: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last—sooner or later the dark power will devour him.

This is pre-eminently true of the One Ring of Power. Its great danger—which appears to be its great virtue, at least in terms of a kind of utility to Frodo—is that it makes its bearer invisible. Sauron himself is the ultimate example of this. He can never be seen because evil has entirely evacuated him of substance, reduced him to nothing but an all-seeing eye. If there was ever a metaphor for modern philosophy as Tolkien must have understood it, it is the disembodied, panoptic eye of Sauron.<sup>100</sup> And this, by the way, is emblematic of a modern disposition, which is not, it must be stressed, the desire to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis* but from the aspect of *nowhere*. That is the true

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<sup>99</sup> Here I am following Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, pp. 174ff.

<sup>100</sup> In this way Tolkien anticipates Foucault, but in a much more theologically profound way.

bondage of *hubris*: not to see from eternity but to see from no-place, to simply *gaze*, to repeat univocally, the same gesture *ad infinitum*.

The Christian story is otherwise. The world can be seen, heard, tasted only *sub specie aeternitatis* because that is the only aspect from which anything could appear. This is not the same as an Archimedean point of ‘objectivity’ which but sees merely appearances as all identical. Rather, to see ‘from the aspect of eternity’ is to see appearances for what they are: surfaces which bear a likeness to one another because they all share in an ontological peacefulness which they do not own or manufacture but receive as gift. They can therefore be like one another but truly different from one another because they are created by the One God, who in His eternal tri-unity, creates the world from nothing. As Jones puts it, “the works of man, unless they are of ‘now’ and of ‘this place’, can have no for ever’.”<sup>101</sup> In the Christian account, to see the creation *sub specie aeternitatis*, then, is not to erect an optic Tower of Babel from which the neutral gaze could reduce all appearances to mere flatness (as happens when one, for example, reads a map), but rather to recognize that the aspect of eternity has not retreated from every act of vision to an inaccessible private realm (i.e., the Cartesian mind as the prototype of this pseudo-eternity). In this sense it is the prime act of *hubris* to *refuse* to see in this way, insofar as it amounts to a rejection that in all our seeing we give as much as we receive, and of the claim that our understanding is never entirely our own property, but partakes of the divine generosity, without which nothing at all could be seen.

In the epilogue to “On Fairy-Stories”, Tolkien speaks of “the Christian Story” as the preeminent fairy-story, not simply because its ending is a happy one. It is Fa‘rie *properly speaking*, and all other true fairy-stories are only so by analogy to this one. It is in the perfect coincidence of the form of the Christian gospel with ‘reality’ in Tolkien’s primary sense that its uniqueness lies. Tolkien is not saying that Christianity is a “fairy-story” because it is like “fairy-stories”; he is saying that the reason “fairy-stories” are persuasive is because they are *like* the Christian story. This is because Fa‘rie is not here, as it is in all other literary sub-creations, an “other world”. Rather, “this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised

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<sup>101</sup> David Jones, Preface to *The Anathemata, Epoch and Artist*, p. 120.

to the fulfillment of Creation.” 102 In this story “Legend and History have met and fused.” 103 It is, moreover, *true*, because its form is Christ, who is the form of beauty. For that reason “the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of primary Art, that is, of Creation.” 104 The gospel is true Faërie —its timbre is not of a happiness conferred by a simple resolution, but the joy of a present pregnant with a promised future.

What does this say about other stories, including pagan ones? There is no doubt that the figure of Zarathustra is quite simply anti-Christian, both in its creator’s explicit intention and in his aesthetic form. And there can be no doubt that the form of Christ represents a comprehensive “revaluation of all values” of pagan antiquity. As Hart has shown, Nietzsche’s opposition, in *The Anti-Christ*, of *Dionysus versus the Crucified*, is a true one, perhaps the only one. In Zarathustra, “one gospel meets another”. 105 Zarathustra’s gospel is in fact as old as Heraclitus, as Nietzsche himself acknowledges; it cannot but be, if all things eternally recur. But it is the Christian revelation which marks the truly revolutionary advent of the new in human culture. One must concede that Nietzsche is exactly right on this point—Christianity does inaugurate an account of beauty, as disclosed in the creating, crucified and risen Incarnate Word, that upsets all previous notions of the same. At the same time, from the side of Christianity, the pagan world can only be seen as the *Beowulf* poet saw it: as created, too, and desiring of God. This means that all stories, including pagan ones, are in the end *anathémata*—“things offered up”—because even ours is no final purchase on the truth. To see *sub specie aeternitatis* then is to grant to those stories their proper integrity as ‘sub-creations’, whether now true or false. As Hart writes, “whereas the story of violence simply excludes the story of peace, the Christian story can encompass, and indeed heal, the city that rejects it: because that city too belongs to the peace of creation, the beauty of the infinite, and only its narrative and its desires blind it to a glory that everywhere pours upon it. Put another way,

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102 J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 156.

103 *ibid.*

104 *ibid.*

105 David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 124.

narratively speaking at least, there is no salvation outside the church because the church has no outside.

Slavoj Žižek writes that

The message of Christianity is that of infinite joy beneath the deceptive surface of guilt and renunciation: “The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegation and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom.”

Is not Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* the ultimate proof of this paradox? Only a devout Christian could have imagined such a magnificent pagan universe, thereby confirming that *paganism is the ultimate Christian dream.*” 107

“All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.”<sup>108</sup> All tales may yet come true because, as Jones says, “There is only one tale to tell.” But as Jones adds, most importantly, “the telling is patient of endless development and ingenuity and can take on a million variant forms.”<sup>109</sup> There is only one tale to tell, and it is what Tolkien calls the *euclastrophe* of the Christian evangel. But because creation partakes of the divine *Logos*, it is capable of potentially infinite variations and modulations upon a single theme, at whose heart is the story of ontological peace.

All other stories may be tales of violence (hence they are the true ‘fairy-stories’, in Nietzsche’s sense), but they may come true—redeemed into a Form whose appearance now may be unlike what its author expected or anticipated. Perhaps this is because, as Tolkien adds in a footnote, the Art of the Christian story is in the story itself rather than

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<sup>107</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT 2003, p. 48. The reference is to G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 164.

<sup>108</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, pp. 155-6.

<sup>109</sup> David Jones, Preface to *The Anathemata, Epoch and Artist*, p. 130.



in the telling; for the Author of the story was not the evangelists.<sup>110</sup> So perhaps ØiØek would be more correct in saying that “Christianity is the ultimate dream of paganism,” because only Christianity preserves paganism as paganism, because the former can imagine difference as harmonious and non-violent in a way that pagan thought cannot. <sup>111</sup>

Truth ever eludes us because it ever draws towards its inexhaustibility. If truth is elusive, this is because it is ever ‘glamorous’ and playful, in the fullest sense of *e-ludere*. The Trinity is endless play, because it is peaceful self-giving *caritas* which has no “outside”. God never ceases from creating the world, and all our making is but a partaking of that creativity. Therefore sin emerges as a refusal of divine generosity, and, as the Scriptures attest from Genesis to Luke-Acts, is an attempt to hoard what is from beginning to end sheer gratuity.<sup>112</sup> Thus the virtues of Hobbiton in their aesthetic distaste of such possessiveness are worthy of imitation.

### *Tolkien or Nietzsche?*

It is well-nigh hackneyed proverbial wisdom that “all that glitters is not gold.” In what could be a summary of Tolkienian aesthetics, however, the refrain throughout *The Lord of the Rings* reverses the syntax on this little bit of traditional wisdom. For as Tolkien has it, “All that is gold does not glitter,” to which he adds,

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<sup>110</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 155, n.2.

<sup>111</sup> This is an egregiously over-simple summary of the argument in Conor Cunningham’s *Genealogy of Nihilism*.

<sup>112</sup> “The Bible...depicts creation at once as a kind of deliberative invention (‘Let us make...’) and, consequently, as a kind of play, a kind of artistry for the sake of artistry. This is expressed with exquisite delicacy in by the figure of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, at play like a small child before the eyes of God, as his delight in all his works; and expressed equally gracefully by the image of the stars singing and the angels rejoicing at creation in the book of Job. For this reason, inevitably, when Christian thought comes to speak of God as being, or of an analogy between creation and the God who gives it, it involves a subversion of many metaphysical concepts of being, a displacement of many an *eidos* by the *eikon* that is like God only in differing freely (and infinitely) from God.” David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 251. See also David Jones, “Art and Sacrament,” *Epoch and Artist*, pp. 153-4.

Not all those who wander are lost;  
The old that is strong does not wither,  
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.  
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,  
A light from the shadows shall spring;  
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,  
The crownless again shall be king.

There is, it seems to me, a substantial, though subtle difference in the two adages. In the first, the traditional, formulation, it amounts to saying something like, “Don’t be fooled by appearances because they are inherently deceptive”. But in Tolkien’s version, it seems to suggest something more along the lines of, “Attend more closely to appearances, for the truth has yet to arrive.” This is particularly true given the ‘eschatological’ thrust of the poem’s concluding line—“the crownless again shall be king”—which points to a fullness of meaning which awaits us. Put another way, in the former case, the “not” negates the gold, while in the latter, it negates the glittering. What is important in the first instance is the “not gold”; in the latter, the “does not glitter”. That is, what Tolkien’s revision of this traditional axiom emphasizes is that the un-gold-like appearance of gold points to an excess in which it is, for that very reason, *more than* gold. Tolkien might be seen here as adverting to a “plenitude of the object,”<sup>113</sup> in the sense that what an object is is really *more than* it is. Moreover, it seems to suggest that beauty is not simply epiphenomenal but attached to the very ontological nature of beautiful things, which may not at all appear so. In other words, Tolkien’s account has it that beauty is not simply a function of the senses or of perception. This is, after all, the demography of Faërie, whose inhabitants “do not always look like what they are.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Maurice Blondel, *Action*, p. 403. See Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (London: Routledge 2003), pp. 179ff.

<sup>114</sup> “On Fairy-Stories”, p. 113.

To make matters more interesting, the precise formulation, albeit in German, appears in, of all places, *Nietzsche's Human, All Too Human*: “Alles, was Gold ist, glänzt nicht.” Section 340 of “The Wanderer and His Shadow”, in R.J. Hollingdale’s translation, reads:

*Gold.*—All that is gold does not glisten. A gentle radiance pertains to the noblest metal.  
115

Nietzsche, by contrast, seems to miss the point. In saying, “A gentle radiance pertains to the noblest metal”, does he not suggest that what sets gold apart as gold is precisely its gold-ly appearance? Does this not mean that gold is the “noblest metal” *because* a “gentle radiance” pertains to it? Or, perhaps, the implication might be, in a more Nietzschean fashion, that the gentle radiance is really all there is to the gold. What it is, is simply, and no more than, its appearance.

Perhaps the clue to this divergence lies in one of the Lessons from *Tenebrae* for Holy Saturday, a reading from Lamentations: *Quomodo obscuratum est aurum, mutatus est color optimus*.<sup>116</sup> “How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed! the stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!”<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the sense of this passage when it is read in the darkness of the in between of Holy Saturday, after the tragic loss of the crucifixion and before the resurrection in the darkness of early Sunday morning, is a function of the liturgical suspension of truth as always already achieved, but only because it has not yet arrived. All truth—as all beauty and all goodness—is only present insofar as it is patient of further articulation. Thus Christ is the form of that truth, beauty and goodness because as the Word made flesh, He is the moment of their arrival—a moment which is already accomplished but remains yet to be consummated. This is the status of all hobbits on their return to the Shire. Theirs is a world suspended in Holy Saturday, between the

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<sup>115</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, ¶340, p. 392.

<sup>116</sup> I owe this observation to David Jones. See “Art and Sacrament”, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 146.

<sup>117</sup> Lamentations 4.1-2, KJV.

scouring of the Shire and the beginning of the Third Age, which, importantly, is not depicted. The success of the quest is not a Pyrrhic victory, then, but a *euclastrophe*, and as such, like the *euclastrophe* of the Gospels.

It may be pagan wisdom to say that “all that glitters is not gold,” but it is Christian wisdom to say that “all that is gold does not glitter.” Even Nietzsche was capable of such an intimation. But the form of Christ is capable of “transubstantiating” all moments of human *poiesis*. The Word who is before all worlds, who was made flesh and dwelt among us, who creates the world: does not all creation speak, in an infinite variety of tones, keys, timbres and tongues, of that Word? Does not the Word made flesh render all flesh in some sense *articulate*? As Jones puts it, “There is no escape from incarnation. It’s like a shunting train.” 118. This is because, as Maurice de la Taille says, in a line Jones is fond of quoting, “He placed Himself under the order of signs.” 119

Tolkien’s is therefore a vision of creation in which there is genuine newness, in which destruction is not necessary to creation. It is the hope of the return of the past in a non-identical newness, in the way that only in the presence-absence of the Christic form of beauty can the world be seen as desiring union with that form. Only then can The Shire be received back, as it is given up in the quest to destroy the Ring. Sam’s words at the end of the cycle, “I’m back” are true in a genuinely naïve sense: the casual nonchalance of the ending seems incommensurate with what has happened, yet at the same time, Sam is more “home” now than when he left. The Shire, though now threatened with the loss of the memory of festive past— a memory which is *absolutely central* to the life of the hobbits, and to the success of the mission—must begin the long work of *anamnesis*, of rendering ‘really present’ those now absent, such as Frodo. The Shire will thus never be the same; it will always be different from what it was and bear the wounds of loss. But the hobbitic hope, like the Christian hope, is not nostalgia for a ‘recovery’ of a vanished past—after all, it is Gollum who is obsessed with “roots and beginnings” 120; instead it is

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118 David Jones, “Religion and the Muses”, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 105.

119 Maurice de la Taille, *The Mystery of Faith* (London: Sheed & Ward 1940), quoted in David Jones, “ Art and Sacrament”, p. 179.

120 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 51.

the hope in the return of the past *to us*, albeit differently. At the same time, that hope gives us back our deaths; indeed, it gives back all deaths and restores them in the promise that the bodies of the dead will be resurrected—they will be returned, not as they were, but glorified. 121 The replanting of the Party Tree is the necessary element of recalling the presence of the lost, the departed and the not-yet, which will restore The Shire once again, for without them, The Shire *is not*. So only in the hobbitic hope of the long-expected party in which all is gift is it then possible

to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;

A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything) 122

What is that hope, if not that of Lamentations, to know gold as earthen pitchers.....

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121 Cf. I Corinthians 15. 36-58.

122 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber 1963), pp. 222-3.