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## ***Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendour, and Transcendence in Middle-earth* by Lisa Coutras**

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*Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendour, and Transcendence in Middle-earth* by Lisa Coutras

place of Morgoth as the tormentor of Gorlim. Comparing this version to the original also shows the development of Tolkien's poetic skill.

Of course, one cannot leave a review of this book without a mention of the illustrations by Alan Lee. I ordered the Kindle version so that I could read the book on the day it was released, but I immediately realized that my Kindle Fire could not do justice to Lee's illustrations, and so I ordered the hardcover edition. Lee has done a pencil sketch for the heading of each section, as well as nine colored plates. I say colored, but his color palette is subdued, as one can see from the dust jacket. I am particularly fond of the illustration of the cat Tevildo in his fortress stalking towards Tinúviel, and the one which shows Celegorm riding off with Curufin, who has just let fly an arrow towards Beren and Lúthien. Any aficionado of Tolkien illustrations would want this volume in her collection.

It is no secret that the names Lúthien and Beren are inscribed on the tombstones of Edith Mary Tolkien and J.R.R. Tolkien, and at the end of his preface Christopher acknowledges his parents' personal connection to the story. My major criticism of this book lies in what Christopher has omitted from the history. The only full telling of the meeting of Beren and Lúthien is that told in "The Tale of Tinúviel," and I was sorely disappointed not to find the version from "The Lay of Leithian." To be sure, the very barest bones of the plot are the same in each, but Beren's change from Gnome to Man fundamentally changes the nature of their relationship, which is reflected in their words and actions in Cantos III and IV of the Lay. Perhaps Christopher felt that the episode told in *The Silmarillion* was sufficient. Perhaps he was unwilling to walk again into territory which was so personal for his parents and, so, for himself. It is a choice which I can respect. But still: after you have met poor Gorlim, please find "The Lay of Leithian" and read Cantos III and IV—you will more deeply appreciate why the rest of the story takes place at all.

—Katherine Neville



**TOLKIEN'S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: MAJESTY, SPLENDOUR, AND TRANSCENDENCE IN MIDDLE-EARTH.** Lisa Coutras. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xvii + 279 p. 9781137553447. \$95.00.

LISA COUTRAS'S *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty* is an important addition to Tolkien Studies, and worthy of being read by more than just those interested in religious readings of the *Silmarillion* *legendarium* or *The Lord of the Rings*. She

utilizes the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar—by many lights the most important Roman Catholic thinker of the twentieth century—to offer a wider reading of beauty in J.R.R. Tolkien’s texts, encompassing notions of power, awe, dread, joy, sacrifice, and pity within an aesthetic of “glory.” While her approach does raise the inevitable tension between the Pagan and Catholic Tolkien, Coutras’s insights are ones that should be open to many, if not most, readers. The question of Tolkien’s own intentions is a necessary (and healthy) point of interpretation for scholars, yet the implications of his work for theological readings can be queried, as it were, even from without. Coutras does briefly attempt to trace through French theologian Louis Bouyer “an indirect dialogue between Balthasar and Tolkien” (14), though this is admittedly tenuous; after all, Tolkien’s friendship with Bouyer began with the latter’s 1958 review of *The Lord of the Rings*. Though what Tolkien himself would have thought is hardly moot, it is not necessary to make too much of this connection: Balthasar is not an alien imposition, as Coutras’s numerous insights show. The Catholic *ressourcement* (or *Nouvelle Théologie*) of the mid-twentieth century was certainly part of the British scholarly conversation, as it was the French and German, and Tolkien was aware of it, at least in general. Indeed, it might be better to describe Tolkien’s *Theology of Beauty* as employing a number of *ressourcement* gestures, rather than bringing *per se* Balthasar’s whole argument to bear.

Coutras adapts most from Balthasar’s *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, in particular Volume 1, *Seeing the Form* and Volumes 4 and 5 on the history of metaphysics. (Her uses of his *Theo-Drama* and his *Explorations in Theology* are chiefly in regard to Beren and Lúthien.) Coutras’s project is not, however, just a reading of Tolkien inspired by Balthasar’s *Glory of the Lord*, but also her own synthesis with a wide spectrum of voices from Tolkien scholarship. What makes her book insightful, even exciting, is the conceptual vocabulary, mostly following von Balthasar, that she offers the reader. The following are some of the more important:

1. “Transcendental property of being”: While beauty can be deceptive, even destructive, a full picture of beauty in Tolkien must account for the objective “radiance of pure reality” because the glory and power of his characters assume an anthropology of human dignity and dynamism (15-17).
2. “The form of the beautiful” suggests a holistic approach to characterization, that the aesthetic of the figures within Tolkien’s fiction can only be accessed by attempting to paint them in the round (40).
3. The notion of “purposeful splendor” allows Tolkien to employ a rational beauty and clarity that borrows from the Celtic aesthetic without the muddle of Celtic whimsy (50).

4. The “external” and “internal nature” of goodness enables Tolkien to employ the symbol of light and with it to make connections between holiness and beauty—Valinor, the Ainur, and the Elves being only the most obvious (56-57).
5. Indeed, the “interiority” of created being allows for a depth of characterization that Tolkien is sometimes denied as possessing; it includes the internal “veiling” of the “splendor of being,” which prepares for the sudden disclosure of characters’ greatness in trying circumstances (65).
6. “Wonder,” then, in the text is a sign of the cosmos’s harmony, while “unrest” is a marker of corruption and a reduction to incoherence (78).
7. *Estel* is “an inborn intuition of the truth which manifests as hope,” which is as an Elvish natural capacity and which the race of Men has lost due to a primeval catastrophe (81).
8. The “law of the *Logos*”: light, language, and music are all manifestations in Tolkien’s cosmology of the gift of rationality and creativity. Speech, in particular, is a necessary aspect of human (and Elvish and Valar) being (92-93, 97-98).
9. “Songs of power” are, then, displays of a character’s splendor and authority; they declare both identity and being (99, 108).
10. The *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the hero, is an expression of absolute love and surrender for another’s good (114ff.).
11. The “law” of horror is “a *perversion* of reality, a mockery of the *Logos*”; that is, horror is the active manifestation of the unbeing of evil, the privation of being, or the corruption and degeneration of a dramatic form’s glory (131ff.).
12. A creature’s “life-form,” following Balthasar, is “the foundation and defining purpose of one’s life,” that is the framework, the ideal, that one has shaped one’s life about (139).
13. Suffering and splendor go together in terms of “tragic glory,” “immortal glory,” and “divine honor,” all of which provide grounds for the beauty and power manifested by those who courageously face the pain of existence (153ff.).
14. The “transcendental feminine” combines both sacrifice and power, renunciation and willed action, allowing for the complexity of Tolkien’s chief female characters (227).

All of these taken together make for a rich set of interpretive possibilities and for a number of serious implications about human meaning and purpose. Balthasar’s notion of the life-form, in particular, is one of Coutras’s most profound appropriations, and one can hope that it will become part of the

standard equipment for Tolkien Studies. A life-form parallels well with Tolkien's method of characterization. Lest we forget, he knowingly refused to write Euro-Western realism with its decidedly Enlightenment-based subjectivity; even his most complex characters are drawn in sharper, more primary, action-oriented forms. The notion of a life-form helps us understand why a reader might admire such characters and even want to be like them, and yet also why such characterization can never be satisfying to everyone.

Tolkien's very themes must deal with instabilities, not only between the pagan and the Christian moral ideals (and in both the medieval and modern readings thereof), but also with the inevitable tensions between the ideals of violence and mercy, self-glory and self-denial, the great and the small, catastrophe and eucatastrophe, freedom and submission, and so on. Coutras's interpretation reminds us that Tolkien's work assumes a hierarchy of life forms that interpenetrate partially in their realization of the classic virtues, yet which also have distinctive emphases and life choices. They themselves are in energetic exchange. The various life-forms of Tolkien's fiction play off against one another in embodying diverse good ways of living—they are, in that sense, all types. Of course, some characters combine qualities, such as the king who is a healer. Yet can even the "great," such as Galadriel, Aragorn, or Gandalf, stay before the reader as a singular, holistic form for very long in the text? Tolkien must often chain together paradoxical descriptions of seemingly opposite and desirable character traits, and not just because the small are limited in understanding their "betters."

Galadriel is one of Coutras's chief examples of this ethical and aesthetic instability. The continually vexing question for many readers is to whether Tolkien's women can be moral and political models worthy of emulation, and Coutras crafts her defense of Galadriel, Éowyn, and Tolkien in great detail. She complains of critics (of Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride in particular) who, by ignoring "complex and nuanced theological framework [...] create simplistic caricatures of both women and men" (247). There is much truth in this. A strong ethical reading always runs into the temptation of distortion, and Coutras's corrective is to show how seeming opposites combine for nuance in Tolkien. She argues, for example, that his ideal of feminine heroism merges the Marian notion of self-renunciation and the Valkyric practice of self-will (229), though she admits that this tension in Galadriel may have as much to do with "narrative cohesion" (221) as with Tolkien's evolving theological and ethical ideals. Regardless, this palimpsest creates a problem: which version or versions of a tale are we to make the interpretive center of a reading, especially a strong moral or religious one?

Coutras contends that what Tolkien does not entirely carry off with Galadriel becomes an interpretive key to the character of Éowyn. According to

Coutras's close reading, Éowyn freely "changes her life-form. [...] She has entered into a new framework," that of healer and cultural leader (243), which she is never forced to do by Faramir or anyone else. In such a reading, Éowyn was always on a trajectory towards some form of sacrifice, either in hope or despair. I suppose it remains an open question as to whether Éowyn the healer obtains (or even should obtain) to the complete Marian ideal that Balthasar prizes. Coutras, after all, is careful to stress that Galadriel and Éowyn are archetypes and not Mary herself, and this does place some appropriate limits on her Balthasarian reading. Balthasar, for his part, not only focused on Mary's self-renunciation but also saw her virginal motherhood as a gift of grace now offered as "an expropriated experience for the benefit of all" those who make up the *communio sanctorum*. The "mystical communism" of the Church made it for Balthasar "almost a matter of indifference whose lot it is to be graced with an archetypal experience" (*Glory of the Lord* I.340-342). This is not quite the joy and love of Éowyn's decision, though perhaps hers, too, is an experience of entering into a space larger than the self alone can provide.

Sacrifice especially is one of the ways that Coutras unpacks and holds together such narrational and character-driven tensions. The human experience is both that of high ideals and broken experience; humans exist in the existential in-betweens of life and death and of aspiration and limit. The energy of this "suspended middle" is one praised by some in the Catholic theological tradition, such as Henri de Lubac and Erich Przywara, yet Balthasar himself insisted that a form—that of the crucified Christ—was necessary to hold together tragedy and comedy. Coutras mentions the place of Christ, naturally enough, within her discussion of *On Fairy-Stories* and of *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, though she is wise to avoid too much focus on the Christological center of Balthasar and Tolkien's understanding: Tolkien scholarship hardly needs one more poorly-derived Christ-figure based on Aragorn or Frodo. Yet when Coutras does put the theology of the Son to work, she opens up some productive possibilities of *figura*, such as with Lúthien, who is a kenotic savior figure, and with Túrin, who, as pagan tragic hero, anticipates (or rather as a twentieth-century creation recalls) the suffering Christ.

In my estimation, Coutras's chapters on Túrin are some of her most insightful, for she shows how the natural and pagan life-form of Túrin is both tragic and beautiful, and how it has a place in the theological imagination of a Catholic. Balthasar sees in Attic tragedy, especially in that of Euripides, a vital precursor and sparring partner to Christianity. The tragic hero's extreme suffering in the face of seeming divine indifference or malice, "when he is finally and necessarily broken apart, can there rise, like a fragrance, the pure essence of human kind, indeed, of being as such" (*Glory of the Lord* IV.103). The ontological questions of human dignity and hiddenness of internal worth come to the

forefront in Túrin's courage, grief, and endurance, so again we see how even a life subject to the hatred of Morgoth can be the object of a reader's emulation. The compatibility between the Northern theory of courage and the Greek tragic vision does remain an open question in such a reading, and Coutras must unpack the nature of Túrin's beauty and his despair in some detail. But she argues convincingly that part of what many readers find so moving in his suffering is paradoxically the manner in which "the splendor of his being" breaks forth (155). The affront of Túrin's suicide to Catholic moral teaching is also a matter Coutras has to reason through in some detail, especially since Tolkien at one point had chosen for the human Túrin to stay for a season in the House of Mandos and to strike the avenging eschatological blow for the race of Men against Morgoth. She explores several options as to why this could be the case, including those of his pity and mercy, as compensation for his heroic destiny, an alternate plotline in which Túrin was destined to save and marry Finduilas, and as compensation for the curse on Hurin's children. (After these, the parallel she draws in conclusion between Túrin and *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* strikes a tin note—the tonal difference is simply too great.)

Likewise, in Coutras's treatment, the kenotic self-giving of Lúthien is not only very different from Túrin's, but also from that of Beren's own total sacrifice for love. For Lúthien, "suffering does not bring a flash of glory followed by death but rather *a fullness of glory followed by life*" (117). Both Beren and Lúthien, then, exhibit aspects of dramatic renunciation that recall Christ. Indeed, they may be seen as mutually compatible not only in a natural marriage (by Elvish legal standards), but also as Christ *figurae*. Beren's glory is that of radiant action—action surprisingly both powerful and yet critically weakened. Lúthien's on the other hand, is seen in her heroic "song of power" that leads not only to Beren's salvation but his ultimate "resurrection" when he is harrowed from Mandos. None of this, Coutras insists, should be read as allegory, but as parallels which take their beauty from the atoning sacrifice of Christ, even as they also point to it. Of course, the ultimate test of sympathy for *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty* is in such readings, yet they also suggest what further possibilities von Balthasar might have for Tolkien Studies. For instance, more could be done with Balthasar's view of sacramental marriage and the failures of marriages in Tolkien's fiction, such as with the undervalued Second Age tale *Aldarion and Erendis*. Likewise, Balthasar's stress on authority, poverty, and concealment could be further teased out with any number of characters. The wealth of Balthasar's material certainly calls for Coutras considering a sequel.

—Philip Irving Mitchell

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**THE FANTASTIC OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE.** Ed. Irena Grubica and Zdeněk Beran. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. vi, 289 pp. ISBN 9781443897426. US \$90.95 (hc).

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING WAS FOUNDED about fifteen years ago by some former lecturers and researchers from the University of Cambridge. The publisher is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Over the last decade it has published a number of collections of academic essays pertaining to J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Mervyn Peake, and to fantasy literature across the board. Most of these collections have been smallish in size, elegantly produced but published at prices rather high for any casual reader. Distribution in North America has been very spotty, but the usually strong representation of European scholarship gives an added reason to seek out these volumes.

*The Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle* is a collection of fifteen essays (and thus somewhat larger than the usual Cambridge Scholars book), with an introduction by the editors. The majority of the contributors are based in continental Europe. The authors whose works are discussed run a wide range. They are mostly British, but two American authors are covered, as well as one from Canada and one from Australia. Of course the remit of this volume predates the writings of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams, the central figures of interest in the Mythopoeic Society, but this volume has relevance in that it covers the generation of writers of the fantastic who preceded Tolkien, Lewis and Williams. (I noted only one mention of an Inkling. In a discussion of “The Rajah’s Diamond” by Robert Louis Stevenson, the evil and accursed diamond of the title is described as “a semi-magical object, like the magical ring of J.R.R. Tolkien,” which releases the magic of chance [83].)

The cover blurb notes that “the essays included here examine how the *fin de siècle* reflects the fantastic and its relation to the genesis of aesthetic ideas, to the concepts of terror and horror, the sublime, and evil, to Gothic and sensation fiction, to the Aesthetic Movement and Decadence.” Which is a good description of what to expect from this book, in terms of content as well as tone