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# Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged "Conflicting Sides" of Tolkien's Singular Self

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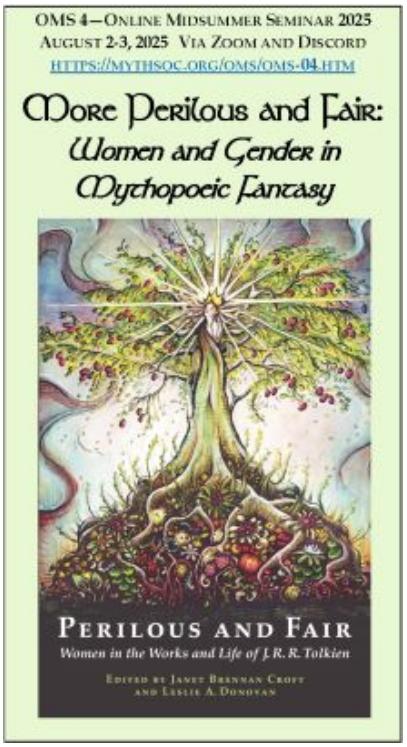


## Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged "Conflicting Sides" of Tolkien's Singular Self


### Abstract

In "The Arch and the Keystone," Mythlore 38:1 (Fall/Winter 2019), 5-17, Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger argues that the conflicts and contradictions she sees in Tolkien's essays and fiction do not call for harmonization but rather should be embraced for what they are: "two opposing and conflicting sides of one person, whose contention makes him who he is as well as what he is, the keystone that creates the arch" of The Lord of the Rings (16) out of the friction of the two sides. Her argument has the virtue of helping us to take both darkness and light in the legendarium with full seriousness. Unfortunately, the alleged contradictions, e.g. between the despair of the Beowulf essay and the hope for eucatastrophe in the essay "On Fairie Stories," reflected by light and darkness in The Lord of the Rings, are created by Flieger's failure fully to understand Tolkien's biblical worldview, where the impossibility of salvation in this life does not contradict, but is the logical setting for, the hope of a redemption not fully realized until the next. Thus an understanding of Tolkien's biblical eschatology dissolves the alleged tension and lets us supplement Flieger's keystone with the cornerstone of Tolkien's worldview, which shows us that the coherence, rather than the contradiction, of Flieger's elements can also function as a useful window on the power of Tolkien's sub-creation.

## Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged “Conflicting Sides” of Tolkien’s Singular Self; Donald T. Williams; eschatology; history; time; eternity; worldview

# Notes and Letters

## Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged "Conflicting Sides" of Tolkien's Singular Self

Donald T. Williams

The unmatched refracting power of Tolkien's secondary creation of Middle-earth as a lens to bring into pregnant focus the sheer concentrated goodness of the primary creation, the poignant mixture of joy and sorrow that is Arda Marred, is ultimately as inexplicable as the Secret Fire itself. It demands our attention more than our analysis, our homage more than our explanation. But because it demands *intelligent* homage, we must attempt analysis and explanation anyway, however inadequate our accounts may be. And so we continue to provide them because even our failures can be enlightening, may open up for us a new road or a secret gate of limited understanding. If I attempt here a partial corrective to one such recent explanation, it is with gratitude for the questions it raised and in hope that my own inadequate answers may yet take us just one more step down the road that goes ever on and on.

Verlyn Flieger is one of our most intelligent and insightful commentators on all things Tolkien. In her classic book *Splintered Light* [*Light*] she offers an account of Tolkien's genius that she brings into sharper focus in the recent essay "The Arch and the Keystone" ["Arch"], which was given as a plenary paper at Mythcon in 2019. Her thesis is that readers see conflicting things in Tolkien because they are simply there, and that this—she does not shrink from calling it—contradiction is in fact the key to his greatness: He is the very keystone that holds the conflicting views, the contrary stresses, of the two sides together so that they form one beautiful Gothic arch: the legendarium. It is an arresting metaphor that effectively captures an analysis that I think contains enough truth and is close enough to being right that the attempt to bend it just a little closer to the reality can produce some important insights.

### The Keystone

Eschewing attempts to reconcile the contradictions she sees in Tolkien's writings, Flieger sees them as reflecting the complexities of the man himself. "The more I read about Tolkien," she says, "the less homogenous a

figure I find" ("Arch" 6). But this is good: It enables Tolkien to capture in his fiction the very same complexity that we find in the real world.

> He's been accused of writing about "good and evil" or "black and white," and maybe that's where the trouble starts, because his good guys do bad things and his bad guys do good things and black and white get blended into grey and their inventor has to answer for all. The man who betrayed Frodo at the Cracks of Doom also arranged to make it Gollum who actually saved Middle-earth. The author who brought Frodo home to the Shire is the same one who made it impossible for him to live there. ("Arch" 7)

It is in Flieger's view the unresolved conflict in Tolkien himself that makes this richness possible. He was "a paradoxical man, 'a man of antitheses' whose invented world derives its energy from paradox and polarity" (*Light* 94).

The central unresolved conflict that Flieger sees in the author as reflected in his work is that between darkness and light, adumbrated in the conflict between despair and hope, and concentrated in what becomes the author's "betrayal" of Frodo at Sammath Naur. It entails a secondary conflict between Christianity and Paganism. Tolkien the Christian wants the light to win, but Tolkien the man is not quite so sure as he thinks he is (or would like to be) that it will. Flieger sees these conflicts explicated in Tolkien's two great essays on *Beowulf* and Fairy Stories, illuminated by his letters, and embodied in his secondary world.

**DARKNESS VS. LIGHT**

Flieger finds not just contrasting themes but "opposing viewpoints" in the two essays "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" and "On Fairy-Stories" ("Arch" 7). She finds it significant that these two great essays at the heart of Tolkien's scholarship each focus on one of the two foci of the great polarity between darkness and light, and not, she thinks, in ways that are entirely compatible. One celebrates pagan darkness and despair, the other ultimately the Christian hope. "The *Beowulf* essay extols a worldview that faces death with courage and accepts it as finally the end. The fairy-story essay exalts the Escape from Death that brings the Happy Ending" ("Arch" 7-8). Inevitable defeat or *eucatastrophe*? Tolkien somehow embraces both.

In her earlier book, Flieger was aware that emphasizing these two contrasting themes does not have to be seen as representing a conflict, much less a contradiction. "Each essay acknowledges that both light and dark are elements held in interdependent tension" (*Light* 12). Without the "little circle of light" protected against it, darkness would lack meaning, and "[t]he ever-present possibility of *dyscatastrophe* is what makes the joy at deliverance so piercing"

(27). She understands that, while Tolkien has sympathy with the courage that allows Beowulf to oppose the monsters without any hope of final victory against them, "it is just as clear that for him this in no way contradicts Christianity" (17). She realizes that "Christian acceptance of the Fall leads inevitably to the idea that imperfection is the state of things in this world and that human actions, however hopeful, cannot rise above that imperfection" (4). As Tolkien expresses it in the *Beowulf* essay and Flieger quotes, the realization that "Man, each man and all men and all their works shall die" is "a theme no Christian need despise" (18). Nevertheless, Flieger still sees a conflict without resolution because "the balance is tipped. Light and dark are contending forces in Tolkien's fiction, but the emotional weight is on the dark side" (4).

We will have to explore Tolkien's own view in more depth later. But Flieger seems to think that any attempt to reconcile the two perspectives robs them of their power. Already in *Splintered Light* she preferred to express the relations of darkness and light in stronger terms. The very choice of the two themes for the two great essays is "an indication of that *antithesis* so deeply rooted in Tolkien's nature. That he could be so powerfully attracted to two such *opposing* outlooks shows plainly the antinomian tension in his own psychology" (*Light* 21, emphasis added). Now in the recent essay the starkness of the contrast is presented simply in terms of contradiction. "I believe this contradiction comes less from without, from the subject matter of the two essays, than from within, from the author's own inclinations" ("Arch" 9-10).

Surely much of the power of Tolkien's vision comes from his ability to evoke both darkness and light and give them both their due, and Flieger's analysis is helpful in the way it brings this point to the fore. But the fact that Tolkien himself would have expressed their relationship differently—explicitly *not* as a contradiction (as even Flieger acknowledged in the book)—must give us pause. It raises further questions to which we must return ere the end. But first we must turn to Flieger's exposition of the inner side of this "conflict."

**Despair vs. Hope**

The conflict between darkness and light in the outer world manifests itself internally as a conflict between despair and hope. The nature of that conflict as contradiction—the absence of any resolution of the conflict in favor of hope—is most clearly seen in what is to Flieger Tolkien's "betrayal" of his hero, Frodo. Indeed, she sees Frodo as possibly the most cruelly and unjustly treated hero in the history of literature. "What Tolkien does to Frodo is worse than what he does to […] Túrin" ("Arch" 13).

There is a happy ending, but Frodo, whose sacrifices made it possible, does not get to participate in it or enjoy it. His will having been ground down by the Ring in the end is seen as an incomprehensible cruelty: "It is unthinkable

that the best hobbit of them all, after his long struggle, his sacrifice, and the humility and mercy he has shown, should go bad" (*Light* 154). And though the Ring is destroyed anyway by an unexpected Providence (though not wholly unforeseen by Gandalf), Frodo must live with an awareness of his failure which will never go away. Hence, the "inadvertent victory" in Sammath Naur "does not lessen the blackness of Frodo's defeat. Here is no *eucatastrophe,* no consolation giving a glimpse of joy" (152)—not, in any case, for Frodo himself. This is presumably why he is unable to live at peace in the Shire he has saved and has to flee to Aman to seek healing.

But do we even know that he will find that healing? "I know what you're going to tell me," Flieger objects. "The Grey Havens […] the far green country. My point is—we never get there" ("Arch" 14). She explains, "In his letters, Tolkien makes it clear that though he sends Frodo to Valinor to be healed 'if that could be done, *before he died'* (*Letters* #246, p. 328, italics in original) that healing is by no means a foregone conclusion, whereas death is" (14). So, while Frodo departs from the Havens to seek healing, his healing in the Far Green Country "is not shown." Therefore "There is no Recovery, no Consolation, no glimpse of Joy beyond the walls of the world" (*Light* 156). The fact that Frodo's healing is only hinted at means that darkness and despair, not light and hope, are the last taste left in the mouth. "For Tolkien, hope and desire seem always to be balanced by despair, so that his final vision remains a vision only, called into question by his hard-won knowledge of the dark, given affirmation by his continuing faith in the light" (165). In *Splintered Light* Flieger uses the word "balanced," but in "The Arch and the Keystone" the impression we get is that "overbalanced" would be the more accurate word, What Flieger does not see in either work is resolution.

Darkness and light, despair and hope, then, remain in conflict. "Hope without guarantees, by its very nature, must give little hint of what comes after. Salvation and redemption and the Music played aright may be alluded to, even foreshadowed, but they are not made manifest" (*Light* 160). For Flieger, a hope accepted by faith is not much of a hope when set against the darkness Frodo faces.

> Release from bondage to the circles of the world comes not with immortality but with death, the Gift of Ilúvatar to men. But it is release with no promise. Tolkien's text gives no guarantees […]. There is in his story no assurance of any future beyond death. The unknown must be accepted in faith. That is exactly the point. (*Light* 144)

Yes, it is. But is it the point Flieger thinks? Again, more on that later.

Frodo's experience at Sammath Naur is seen as something from which any recovery is impossible in this world and all but impossible in the next. What

remains absolutely impossible in this world is any assured hope of such recovery. "Instead of Sam's Happy Ending, Frodo gets the tragic hero's *peripateia*, reversal of fortune. Instead of coming home to Rosie he has to leave Bag End and the Shire and Middle-earth for an unknown future" ("Arch" 14). Every possible positive foreshadowing of a hopeful final destiny is discounted. The restoration of Frodo to his true self after the destruction of the Ring, for example, is "wishful thinking. The view is through Sam's eyes, and Sam is blinded by love and hope" (*Light* 155). The fact that light and hope are kept in the arch at all becomes an astounding achievement on this view—and that is what Flieger thinks is precisely the point.

One virtue of Flieger's approach is that it forces us to take the darkness with full seriousness so that any cheap victory (if anyone could find such a thing in Tolkien) is swept away out of our consciousness for good. And surely giving darkness its full value is essential to getting the full impact of the eucastastrophe. Using the contrast between Fairy Tale and Tragedy, Flieger explains well that

> Tolkien forces Frodo to live with the knowledge of his moral failure at a job he never wanted to do in the first place. The tragic hero's failure brings about the fairy-story hero's Happy Ending. Frodo and Sam, at the Cracks of Doom and in the aftermath, embody between them the final tension and opposition that characterizes Tolkien's masterwork. ("Arch" 13)

She continues, "Like Beowulf, Frodo cannot win. His Quest cannot succeed. And then in the twinkling of an eye through Gollum's treachery it does succeed and the reader is thrown out of epic tragedy back into fairy-story to experience the most stunning *eucatastrophe* in modern literature" ("Arch" 14).

Yes, it is. And Flieger's analysis, up to a point, is a good explanation of why it is so. But we should ask: Is there a way to retain that insight while affirming a greater level of coherence in Tolkien's thought? Flieger thinks that a doomed quest, but we shall attempt it e'er the end.

**CHRISTIAN VS. PAGAN**

Another form of the unresolved conflict Fieger sees at the heart of Tolkien's vision is that between the paganism of the Beowulf essay and the Christianity of the epilogue to "On Fairy-Stories." Tolkien's stories clearly do not have the explicit theological content we find in a work like *The Chronicles of Narnia*—which makes possible an endless debate over how much Christian content is there and how deep it goes (reminiscent of a similar discussion in the history of Beowulf criticism).

Tolkien himself made statements on the questions that could be seen as not wholly consistent. He famously wrote to Fr. Robert Murray, S.J., in 1963

that *The Lord of the Rings* is a "fundamentally religious and Catholic" work; but then he told interviewer Harry Resnick in 1966 that it is "not a christian [sic] myth anyhow" (qtd. in "Arch" 10). In 1965 he told W. H. Auden in a letter that he "intended" the book "to be consonant with Christian thought and belief." Flieger comments that "'consonant with' is a long way from 'fundamentally,'" and concludes that Tolkien "is more comfortable with paradox than some of his readers" (10-11).

Flieger sees confirmation of the distance between "fundamentally" and "consonant with" in an exchange that Murray had with a graduate student in 1980. Murray wrote that "Tolkien was a very complex and depressed man, and my own opinion of his imaginative creation […] is that it projects his very depressed view of the universe at least as much as it reflects his Catholic faith." He admits that "There *is* a case to be made about Tolkien the Catholic," but concludes that "I simply could not support an interpretation which made this the key to everything" (qtd. in "Arch" 15).

Flieger does not accept such an interpretation either. She rightly acknowledges that "The genesis and continuing history, the religio-philosophical basis on which it stands, the governing principles—all these are explicit in the Silmarillion, implicit in *The Lord of the Rings*. Without the one, the other could not exist" (*Light* xvi). But what is that religio-philosophical basis? For Flieger it is unsurprisingly ambiguous:

> [O]nly in the most general sense can *The Silmarillion* be characterized as Christian, and in no sense at all can *The Lord of the Rings* be given so definitive a label. That both works are informed with the spirit of Christianity is clear. However, the seeker after explicit Christian reference, as distinct from Christian meaning, will find little in either book to get a grip on. (*Light* xx)

One might question how a work can be informed with the spirit of that which makes no specific appearances in it. The key word here is *explicit*. How explicit does an element have to be to be significant? Is it the Stone Table or nothing?

Why is this point important for Flieger's analysis? Because the less profoundly and unambiguously Christian the "religio-philosophical basis" of Tolkien's world is, the more room there is in it for antithesis and contradiction. So Flieger concludes:

> What [Tolkien's readers] see is there, even when they're seeing contradictory things. So instead of wrestling with Tolkien's contradictions, instead of trying to reconcile them or harmonize them, I propose that we take them *as* they are for *what* they are, two opposing and conflicting sides of one person whose contention makes him *who* he

> is as well as *what* he is, the keystone that creates the arch. Without it there's just a pile of bricks. ("Arch" 16)

**THE CORNERSTONE**

Well, there is more than one way to give order to a pile of bricks. Is it possible to find a greater coherence between the contrasting themes that Flieger delineates so well, and find it in a way that makes that coherence as least as effective as a window into the power of Tolkien's vision? Perhaps we can find in this pile not just a keystone but also the cornerstone of a foundation that could let us see these bricks as parts of a Tower from which we could look out upon the sea.

It is clear that Tolkien himself saw no conflict, much less a contradiction, between the darkness and despair of the Beowulf essay and the light and hope of eucatastrophe, and that he thought the content and structure of his Christian faith provided the bigger picture into which both of those elements could coherently fit. Kreeft summarizes it well:

> Tolkien's characters are crypto-Christians. They do not know, believe, mention, wonder about, or allegorize Christian doctrine. But they exemplify exactly what life would be like if the Christian claims are true, especially in its central paradox about immortality through death and resurrection of the self, self-realization through self-sacrifice. (99)

This is shown by Tolkien's own comments about light and darkness, his own comments about his legendarium, and most importantly by the plot structure of the legendarium itself and the beliefs of the Wise within it.

**TOLKIEN ON DARKNESS/DESPAIR VS. LIGHT/HOPE**

In her earlier book, Flieger was aware that emphasizing these two contrasting themes does not have to be seen as representing a conflict, much less a contradiction. As we saw above, she admits that "each essay acknowledges that both light and dark are elements held in interdependent tension" (*Light* 12). Without the "little circle of light" protected against it, darkness would lack meaning, and "the ever-present possibility of *dyscatastrophe* is what makes the joy at deliverance so piercing" (27). She understood that Tolkien's sympathy with the courage that allows Beowulf to oppose the monsters without any hope of final victory "in no way contradicts Christianity" (17). She realized that the Christian doctrine of the Fall "leads inevitably to the idea that imperfection is the state of things in this world and that human actions, however hopeful, cannot rise above that imperfection" (4). As Flieger quotes from the *Beowulf* essay, Tolkien thought that "Man, each man and all men and all their works shall die" is "a theme no Christian need despise" (18). Nevertheless, Flieger still

saw a conflict without resolution because "The balance is tipped. Light and dark are contending forces in Tolkien's fiction, but the emotional weight is on the dark side" (4). In the recent essay she doubles down on the conflict as contradiction.

But is the balance really tipped, or is what Flieger perceives as an imbalance simply a reflection of the fact that we no less than the characters of the legendarium still live in Arda Marred, and in an age of Arda Marred (which is true of all ages save the last) when the marring is a present fact and the restoration an unfinished process that requires us, as the Apostle Paul puts it, to "walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7)? Tolkien expressed it exactly thus in a letter to Amy Ronald dated 15 December 1956: "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat'—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory" (*Letters* 255, #195). David Thomas understands this: "History is God's judgment on a humanity cast out of his presence; nothing in that idea suggests triumph" (44). In other words, "history, burdened with sin and death, is what the Son rescues us from" (45).

The fact that these samples are only glimpsed (faith, not sight) does not for Tolkien make them any less poignant or less powerful than the surrounding darkness; rather, the contrary. As he wrote to Camilla Unwin on 20 May 1969, "the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks" (*Letters* 400, #310). The possibility of praise and thanks *in the midst* of present suffering and *in the absence* of any final victory *yet experienced* is precisely what Tolkien's Christian faith purports to offer. Such hope is based in the primary world on a knowledge of God that Tolkien thought Christian revelation could give us and in the secondary world on an understanding of the character of Ilúvatar that is ultimately what sustains the Wise. Tolkien would not have accused them of contradiction for holding to it.

**TOLKIEN ON THE LEGENDARIUM**

The place to start in any discussion of Tolkien's view of his own story is the famous 2 December 1952 letter to Robert Murray:

> *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters* 172, #142)

The letter makes some strong claims. "Consciously in the revision" means that, despite the lack of conscious awareness or intention of including Christian meaning at first, Tolkien not only became increasingly aware of the many ways in which his own most deeply held beliefs about the world had informed the work but took deliberate steps to strengthen their presence and role as the work proceeded. The result was such that he felt justified in using the adverb "fundamentally." There is nothing approaching allegory, or even the explicit symbolism of Lewis's Narnia books, but the "religious element" is not less significant or deeply ingrained for that, being "absorbed into the story."

I would argue that the burden of proof is on anyone who would discount these claims. I think they are upheld by the weakness of the arguments Flieger urges against them and by the fact that they are justified by the most coherent reading of the legendarium itself.

Flieger lays great stress on Murray's opinion that Tolkien was a depressed person, that *The Lord of the Rings* reflects that depression as much as Tolkien's Christianity, and that therefore Murray could not support an interpretation of the work that made its Christianity central ("Arch" 15). But that is precisely what it is: an opinion. It needs to be set beside Clyde S. Kilby's opinion after spending extended time with Tolkien helping him with *The Silmarillion* that "My experience with Tolkien made it clear to me that he was a devout Christian and *very sure* of a larger fulfillment beyond the grave" (82, emphasis added). Murray's opinion is interesting, no doubt, but if we find that Christian themes and motifs play a central role in the story, it hardly constitutes an argument against that role. Flieger also cites Tolkien's comment to interviewer Harry Resnick in 1966 that the book is "not a christian [sic] myth anyhow" ("Arch" 10) and the language of the 1965 letter to W. H. Auden to the effect that Tolkien "intended" the work "to be consonant with Christian thought and belief." Flieger as we have seen contends that "'consonant with' is a long way from 'fundamentally,'" and concludes that Tolkien "is more comfortable with paradox than some of his readers" (10-11).

But there is not necessarily any paradox in those statements at all. Tolkien could very well have meant by "not a Christian myth" simply that the story was not written to be a precise parallel to the Gospel in the way that Tolkien objected to in the Narnia books. The structure of the secondary world and the meaning of what happens in it could still be "fundamentally" Christian in significant ways. And "consonant with" does not have to be "a long way" from "fundamentally." It can be, but it does not have to be. So how should we take it? We ought generally to interpret a writer's statements as being consistent in fact when they are capable of being read as consistent, unless we have a very good reason not to. I simply do not find the reasons Flieger advances to be compelling.

That Tolkien meant the word "fundamentally" is confirmed by the draft of a letter to Peter Hastings from September 1954: "I would claim, if I did not think it presumptuous in one so ill-instructed, to have as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home'" (*Letters* 194, #153). The self-deprecation does not cancel the elucidation, nor does the unfamiliarity of the embodiments necessarily compromise their effectiveness; for some readers it actually helps in bringing them home. Ultimately the story itself must tell us whether Tolkien's or Murray's version is correct, as well as whether Tolkien's statements about it hold together.

An element of the story that Flieger sees as pointing most clearly to non-resolution is Tolkien's "betrayal" of Frodo at the Cracks of Doom. Frodo's burden of guilt and suffering prevents him from enjoying the Shire he has saved, and the inescapable *reality* of his pain is juxtaposed with mere *hints* of the possibility of healing in Aman, a healing that we never get to see. In other words, for Flieger sight trumps faith, and the fact that sight (of suffering) is not matched by sight (of healing) forestalls any view of the work that sees resolution between them. Is that a fair reading, or is there evidence that Tolkien was up to something else? It appears that he certainly thought he was.

In letters written to different people at different times it is easy to find passages that do not appear to be consistent. In a draft to Miss J. Burn of 26 July 1956, Frodo "failed" because "the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'" (*Letters* 252, #191). But in a draft to Mrs. Eileen Elgar of September 1963, Frodo is not a "*moral* failure" because "the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment" is parallel to the breaking of his body (*Letters* 327, #246). The contradiction is only apparent. In the first statement Frodo fails *to complete his assignment*, while the second qualifies that this failure was not a *moral* failure but rather a matter of having been overwhelmed by the power of the Ring. In either case, "Frodo deserved all honour because he spent every drop of his power of will and body, and that was just sufficient to bring him to the destined point, and no further" (to Amy Ronald, 27 July 1956, *Letters* 253, #192). Tolkien then did not think of Frodo as carrying a burden of *guilt* that hindered his finding peace in the Shire. His suffering was real, but it was cleaner and less ego-threatening than that.

In two unsent drafts of letters responding to questioners, Tolkien gives his own most extensive commentary on the meaning of Frodo's experience. In a draft of a response to one Michael Straight, probably composed January through February 1956, Tolkien explains,

> [T]he 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. At any point any prudent person would have told Frodo that Gollum would certainly betray him and could rob him in the end. To 'pity' him, to forebear to kill him, was a piece of folly, or a mystical belief in the ultimate value-in-itself of pity and generosity even if disastrous in the world of time. He did rob him and injure him in the end—but by a 'grace', that last betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing anyone cd. have done for Frodo! By a situation created by his 'forgiveness', he was saved himself, and relieved of his burden. He was very justly accorded the highest honours […]. (*Letters* 234, #181)

Note that Tolkien thought that Frodo's salvation was "achieved." He was also "relieved of his burden" and "*justly* accorded the highest honours." His salvation is not just achieved; its achievement is at the very heart of Tolkien's vision. "[T]o Gandalf, this salvation from evil—a spiritual salvation that comes not from physical might or military victory, but from repenting of the evil and choosing the good—is the highest and greatest end for all in Middle-earth" (Dickerson 159).

It is true that Frodo's relief was not fully experienced "in the world of time," where disaster remains a real possibility. Frodo's "mystical belief" in the ultimate value of pity is revealed as correct. not by his experience in time (his life in the Shire), but precisely by the foreshadowings of healing beyond it that include the dream at Bombadil's house, Arwen's intention, Aragorn's faith that beyond the circles of the world there is more than memory, etc. We do not *see* the sunrise in the far green country, not because it is more doubtful than darkness, but because we, like Sam, Merry, and Pippin, still live in the world of time. But if we can suspend our disbelief in the premises of Tolkien's world, that lack of sight does not make the sunrise less real. Whether or not we can believe that the Christian story is true in the primary world, in Tolkien's secondary world we are precisely asked to suspend our disbelief in the real possibility of walking by faith and not by sight—as the key to true vision.

In the draft of a response to a Miss J. Burn written in July of that year, Tolkien adds,

> If you re-read all the passages dealing with Frodo and the Ring, I think you will see that not only was it *quite impossible* for him to surrender the Ring, in act or will, especially at its point of maximum power, but that this failure was adumbrated from far back. He was honoured because he had accepted the burden voluntarily, and had then done all that was within his utmost physical and mental strength to do. He (and the Cause) were saved—by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury. (*Letters* 251-2, #191)

Once again, Frodo *and* the Cause are saved—not just the Cause. Dickerson summarizes it well: "not only might the showing of mercy lead to the salvation of others [the recipients], but it may be the most important instrument in the salvation of the one showing the mercy" (162). The difference is that the Cause—saving the Shire—happens in time, because the Shire exists within the circles of the world. Frodo's salvation is a fact, but a fact that cannot and will not be *fully* experienced within the circles of the world, in time. We walk by faith and not sight. This is not a contradiction. It is a recognition of the eschatological (i.e., teleological and world-historical) framework within which we live.

**Tolkien in the Legendarium**

So much for Tolkien's comments outside of the work. Authors are not necessarily infallible interpreters of their own work, but Tolkien was a good interpreter of works in general (as proved by the *Beowulf* essay). Therefore, we should accept his interpretation of the Legendarium if it is supported by the story itself. In the story we will find that consistent perspectives of those accounted the Wise of Middle-earth combine with key elements of the plot to suggest that Tolkien knew exactly what he was doing. Kreeft is absolutely right: "The main way *The Lord of the Rings* is religious is in its form, its structure" (68).

In this light, Frodo's seemingly compromised victory at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings* turns out to be part of a larger pattern of experience that we could simply call "life in Arda Marred." For Arda *has* been marred by the rebellion of Melkor, and that marring is an inescapable fact that will not go away until the great final chord of the Music, flowing from the Third Theme that lies only with Ilúvatar himself. That is why *The Silmarillion* ends thus:

> Here ends the SILMARILLION. If it has passed from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin, that was of old the fate of Arda Marred; and if any change shall come and the Marring be amended, Manwë and Varda may know; but they have not revealed it, and it is not declared in the dooms of Mandos. (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 255)

The Amending lies in the Third Theme and hence not even Manwë, Varda, or Mandos fully comprehend it, nor can they reveal it to Men or Elves. They know it is coming because the Music has already been played and in fact did end in a Resolution that is therefore every bit as much part of ultimate reality as Melkor's discord—the memory of it is already part of their experience. So when Ilúvatar said, "*Eä!* Let these things Be" (20), the final chord became as certain a part of the history of Arda as any moment being actually experienced in the present or remembered from the past. Yet the damage unleashed by Melkor can never be wholly mended *until* the End, which is not part of the Third Age nor yet the Fourth. Both of these realities are true of Arda as we experience

it in time, and they are not logically contradictory. It is because of their faith in that coming final chord that the children of Ilúvatar can oppose the evil works of Morgoth and Sauron, and do so with hope, even in times of great darkness—but it is a hope that they know full well will never be completely fulfilled in time.

That knowledge is why darkness and light, hope and despair, joy and sorrow always appear together in Tolkien's tales, and why we never get to see unalloyed light (though an image of it does flicker around the high Elves and appear almost settled for a while in a place like Lórien). Kilby noted how Tolkien "described his problem in depicting the fall of mankind near the beginning of the story. 'How far we have fallen!' he exclaimed—so far, he felt, that it would seem impossible even to find an adequate prototype or to imagine the contrast between Eden and the disaster which followed'" (59). There is no minimizing of the darkness. "[T]he lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days" (*Silmarillion* 255). That is why, "if joyful is the fountain that rises in the sun, its springs are in the wells of sorrow unfathomed at the foundations of the Earth" (40). And that is why The War of the Ring "ended both in victory unlooked for *and* in sorrow long foreseen" (303; emphasis added).

This pairing of light and darkness, joy and sorrow, is a consistent motif not because Tolkien was conflicted over which was stronger or which would ultimately win, but because he is telling stories about the age of Arda Marred in which we live, between the Marring and the Final Chord. While this age (or these ages) of the world endures, while these measures of the Music play out, it will always be true that "as surely as the Valar began a labour so Melkor would undo it or corrupt it. And yet their labour was not all in vain" (*Silmarillion* 22). C.S. Lewis understood well the significance of such language and agreed with it. In a letter to Tolkien of 24 December 1962 he wrote, "I know that one can at best only wound, not kill, the dragon. All my philosophy of history hangs upon a sentence of your own: 'Deeds were done that were not *wholly* in vain'" (Lewis, *Letters*, 3:1396; cf. Williams, *Deeper Magic* 233-8). Both men capture the essence of a shared Christian philosophy of history that flows from Christian eschatology. All utopianisms of the present, all foolish promises of a war to end all wars, are ruled out because of the Fall in our past. Yet despair is equally ruled out, hope remains, and deeds not wholly in vain can be done because of the Eschaton in our future.

That Eschaton, that final chord of the Great Music, is why hope remains despite the depths of the darkness that Flieger describes so well and why deeds not wholly in vain are worth attempting and sacrifices worth making by people who, if they are mortals, know they will not live to see their final fruition.

Ilúvatar is still conducting the Symphony toward its final chord; He is still at work in the world. That is why Gandalf's wisdom really is wisdom and not the unutterable folly it must seem to one like Denethor whose faith has been overwhelmed by sight through the Palantír working on his own hubris.

Gandalf is wise precisely because he does not think like one whose vision is limited to what can be seen with the eyes of flesh: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought" (*Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] I.2.56; see the explication of this speech in Williams, *Encouraging Thought* 28-33; cf. *Mere Humanity* and "Is Man a Myth?"). The same perspective moves Gildor to say that "In this meeting there may be more than chance" (I.3.84). It enables Elrond to believe that the members of the Council were called, though he had not called them: "You are come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that *it is so ordered* that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world" (II.2.242, emphasis added). The Wise are the Wise precisely because they know who is ordering things, and to what End. That is why they listen to (and in their own words amplify) the voice of Ulmo: "In the armour of Fate (as the Children of Earth name it) there is ever a rift, and in the walls of Doom a breach, until the full-making, which we call the End. So it shall be while I endure, a secret voice that gainsayeth and a light where darkness was decreed" (*Unfinished Tales* 29). And they know that the End is not yet, because in the present we live in Arda Marred.

As the Ring-bearer, Frodo is the place in the legendarium where the themes of the Music meet with their greatest intensity. His experience then is not unique. It is life in Arda Marred writ large; it is life in Arda Marred in concentrated form. The Elves must eventually lose Rivendell or Lórien to return to Aman. Mortal men must say goodbye all too quickly to everything they have built. That is why, both in this life and with reference to the next, the chief characteristic distinguishing Men from Elves is their "seeking elsewhither" (*Unfinished Tales* 225). Perhaps the Ents express this reality most clearly in their search for the Entwives: "We believe that we may meet again in a time to come, and perhaps we shall find somewhere a land where we can live together and both be content. But it is foreboded that that will only be when we have both lost all that we now have" (*LotR* III.4.476).

Frodo too must lose all that he now has—Bag End and the Shire—to find something higher. The wounds of the Ring remove the veil: They mean that he faces consciously and more quickly what is ultimately true for every other person as well. Sam, for example, will eventually have to say farewell to Rosie, either by taking ship from the Havens or by dying—with or without the clear

understanding of what is happening that Aragorn shows in "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen." Aragorn does not sugar-coat it, "for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world" (*LotR* App.A.1062). But, walking by faith and not by sight, he knows how the Music ends and can therefore say, "[L]et us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!" (1063).

The Shire, in summary, then, is a very good thing and worth saving; but it is a pleasant inn on the journey, not the final Destination which lies beyond the circles of the world. (This world is named Middle-earth, after all, after the Medieval concept of a place of testing suspended in a very precise middle, between Heaven and Hell.) Frodo's wounds impel him onward at a more rapid pace toward that higher Destination; they do not compromise either its existence or its certainty.

Frodo's last days in The Shire are narrated in a manner consistent with this outlook. He truly suffers. Gandalf observes that "There are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured" (*LotR* VI.7.989)—at least not in this world—and Frodo has moments when "It is gone forever, […] and now all is dark and empty" (VI.9.1024). But he always recovers from those moments and has good days that he is able to enjoy, days when his statement to Sam at the Field of Cormallen is true: "I am alright otherwise" [save for his missing finger] (VI.4.952). He is able to put his real pain in context and be philosophical about it: "I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (VI.9.1029). He is able to believe that his sufferings had a purpose. Most significantly, it is reported at the end that he was "filled with a sadness that was yet *blessed* and *without bitterness*" (VI.9.1029, emphasis added). This is not a "betrayal" in which Tolkien treats his hero with inexplicable cruelty, nor is it an ending, with all its soberness, to a tale that embodies a contradiction without resolution between light and darkness.

There is then no reason not to feel the full force of the foreshadowings of a fully blessed end for Frodo. Arwen had said, "If your hurts grieve you still and the memory of your burden is heavy, then you may pass into the West, until all your wounds and weariness are healed" (*LotR* VI.5.974-75). She did not say, "for a chance of healing" or "in case you can be healed" but "*until* all your wounds and weariness are healed"—"until *all* your wounds and weariness are healed" (emphasis added). It is in the light of that promise that we read that "then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil [a dream that was surely placed there for a reason], the grey rain-curtain turned all to

silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise" (VI.9.1030). Flieger may not ever get there (in her essay), but Frodo does.

**CONCLUSION**

Keystone or cornerstone? Perhaps we can see both if we stand back at the right distance to see the Tower as a whole. Darkness and light, despair and hope, paganism and Christianity are indeed presented with a creative tension that, precisely because it is able fully to embody the power of both sides of those pairs, drives the plot arc so that it pierces the profoundest depths of reality. Tolkien as the keystone who holds this two-sided arch together is a wonderful metaphor for which we are grateful to Verlyn Flieger. But perhaps a better understanding of the Christian philosophy of history, the biblical eschatology, that underlies Tolkien's work can allow us to see that it is the coherence, not the contradiction, between those pairs, when seen in that larger context, that allows them to function so powerfully. It allows us, in other words, to see that the keystone and the arch it holds together are solidly grounded in the cornerstone of Tolkien's worldview. That is why, from the top of this Tower, we may still look out upon the sea.

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## A Holiday by the Sea: In Search of Cair Paravel

Reggie Weems

There is no doubt that the geography of Northern Ireland influenced the landscape of C.S. Lewis's Narnia (Hooper, *They Stand Together* 470-1). It provided "an endless source of imaginative inspiration [...] to help create the imaginary worlds of his supernatural fiction" (Bresland, *The Backward Glance* 107). This is particularly true of Dunluce Castle, "a likely source for Cair Paravel" (Duriez 22). And yet, it is not just "[a]mong the romantic ruins of Dunluce Castle [but also] the windswept beaches of the Causeway Coast, [that] we can detect something of the origins of Cair Paravel" (Bresland, *Northern Ireland* 19). But where specifically along the twenty-mile Antrim Coast of Northern Ireland might that be? Perhaps Lewis left a hint in a conversation among two of Narnia's monarchs.

As Lucy and Peter made their way "further up and further in" to true Narnia (*The Last Battle* XV.161), the pair recognized familiar territory, prompting Lucy to ask Peter where he supposed they were.

> "I don't know," said the High King. "It reminds me of somewhere but I can't give it a name. Could it be somewhere we once stayed for a holiday when we were very, very small?" (XV.167)

For Lewis, that "somewhere" could very well be the quaint, tranquil, oceanside village of Castlerock, located on the rugged and picturesque Antrim coast of Northern Ireland, approximately 62 miles from his home in Belfast. There are several reasons to think this and that the Bishop's Palace and Mussenden Temple of Downhill Demesne adjacent to Castlerock may serve as an earlier and more influential model for Cair Paravel than Dunluce Castle.