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"It Is 'About' Nothing But Itself": Tolkienian Theology Beyond the Domination of the Author

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Abstract

There is a broad stream of Christian interpretation of J.R.R. Tolkien's fiction, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, which views it as the intentionally, essentially Christian work of an intentionally, essentially Christian author. This reductive, exclusivist approach does not do justice to the complex, generative interactivity between Tolkien's faith, the faith of his readers (or lack thereof), and the text itself. Building on work by Veryln Flieger, Michael Drout, and Robin A. Reid, this paper interrogates how Christian Tolkien scholarship drafts Tolkien the human sub-creator to perform Foucault's author-function by suppressing his contradictions and painting a figure whose life and works speak with a single, authoritative voice. Then, drawing on progressive Christian and Jewish hermeneutics and Tolkien's own writings on intent and the freedom of the reader, it proposes a hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration that honors Tolkien's Roman Catholic foundations, the sub-creative integrity of his secondary world, and the religious diversity of the readers who draw such deep wells of meaning from it. In so doing, it intervenes in ongoing conflict in the field of Tolkien Studies and Tolkien fandom more broadly over diverse interpretations of his fiction and the control of Tolkienian meaning.

Additional Keywords

Hermeneutics; Theology; Eucatastrophe; Religion; Foucault, Michel—Literary theories; Hermeneutics; Jewish theology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious interpretations; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of eucatastrophe

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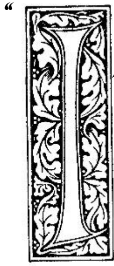
“t is ‘About’ Nothing But Itself”: Tolkienian Theology Beyond the Domination of the Author

Tom Emanuel

Introduction: “A Sudden Glimpse of the Underlying Reality”

It is Tuesday, the seventeenth of April 2012. This bluff above the Missouri River has little enough in common with the English West Midlands that were so beloved of J.R.R. Tolkien. Still, in that liminal space this side of the spring equinox when the Upper Midwest prairie is finally beginning to thaw after the long winter and the sky is high and chilly blue, the countryside has something of that “tone and quality […] somewhat cool and clear” which Tolkien once used to describe the atmosphere of Middle-earth (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [*Letters*] 144, #131). I am in the final semester of my undergraduate studies at the University of South Dakota, and I am still basking in the afterglow of the first Easter Sunday service I have ever attended of my own volition. After a militantly agnostic adolescence, I have recently found a spiritual home at a local congregation of the theologically progressive United Church of Christ (UCC). At the same time, I am taking a senior honors seminar on *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*). Middle-earth is a load-bearing wall in the architecture of my imagination: my father read me *The Hobbit* when I was an infant, and ever since I read *LotR* for myself at the age of ten I have reread it annually. On this particular Tuesday, my seminar has just discussed those fateful chapters of *The Return of the King* in which the One Ring is destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. The entire Quest has been leading up to this breathtaking moment of vindication in which the power of Sauron is overthrown, not by force of arms or even by force of will, but by the mysterious workings of Pity for the pitiless and Mercy upon the merciless. Some years later Verlyn Flieger will describe it as “the most stunning *eucatastrophe* in modern literature” (“The Arch and the Keystone” [“Arch”] 14), but even without knowing the word “eucatastrophe” I have always agreed with her. Now, as I step out of the seminar-hall into the noonday sun, my professor and I continue the animated conversation from class. While we talk, my mind goes back to my recent experience of Holy Week and Easter Sunday. My religious awakening and my love of *LotR* collide, and I venture aloud an intuition which feels tentative but true: “So in some sense Jesus’ ‘failure’ on the Cross is like Frodo’s ‘failure’ at Mount Doom, isn’t it?”

Looking back now as an ordained minister in the UCC and a theologian whose research focuses on the interplay between religion and popular culture in general and Tolkien in particular, I am persuaded that something very interesting was happening in that moment of connective insight. I am not, however, persuaded that the kinds of Christian readings which predominate in the field of Tolkien Studies provide a compelling explanation for it.

There is a genre of scholarship which sees Tolkien's legendarium as a kind of fairy-story preparatio evangelica for the postmodern world. Ralph Wood makes a cogent case for a Catholic dynamics of mercy and radical vulnerability undergirding the paradoxical fulfillment of the Ring-bearer's quest through the very mechanism of the Ring-bearer's failure. It is "a strange sort of victory," he writes, one brought about "within a community built on apparent weakness rather than obvious strength, embodying a triumph that comes not by seizing but by surrendering coercive power, even unto death" (263). He explicitly connects this to the crucifixion of Jesus and to the Church which arises in its wake before ascribing the ultimate victory at the Sammath Naur not to Frodo, nor even to Gollum, but to Ilúvatar working behind the scenes by means of Providence. However, Wood contends, Tolkien realized that making Ilúvatar's action explicit at this moment, even at the level of providential indirection, would strain the credulity of modern readers who have been trained by secularizing modernity to distrust Christianity. Thus God is nowhere to be found in the main narrative of *LotR*, least of all here at its climactic moment. This strategy, in turn, permits readers "in the know" to uncover the text's theological significance without alienating those readers who have yet to convert to Christianity themselves. That such a conversion is Tolkien's implicit hope remains, for Wood, beyond doubt. Matthew Dickerson draws a similar parallel between Niggle's Parish, the appropriately named garden which the painter Niggle and his neighbor Parish co-create in the afterlife in "Leaf by Niggle," and *LotR* itself: "For countless people, *The Lord of the Rings* has provided splendid refreshment. For that, the author would be glad. But his deeper desire is that for some it would be an introduction to the Mountains" (250)—the mountains in this case signifying Christian Heaven. Bradley J. Birzer meanwhile positions Tolkien's fiction as narrative apologetics for Catholic integralism and the restoration of a modern Holy Roman Empire (xxiv). Joseph Pearce's foreword to Birzer's book synopsizes the thesis of his own 1998 biography of Tolkien: "It is, therefore, not merely erroneous but patently perverse to see Tolkien's epic as anything other than a specifically Christian myth" ("Foreword to *Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*" ix). It is not difficult to identify other Christian interlocutors who concur, including Jason Boffetti, Austin Freeman, Paul Kerry, Peter Kreeft, Phillip Irving Mitchell, Charlie Starr, Claudio Testi, and Donald Williams.

This view draws upon a number of Tolkien's non-narrative comments on the relationship between his fiction and his faith for justification. Chief among these is the oft-quoted 1953 letter to Robert Murray that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (*Letters* 172, #142). A 1971 draft of a letter to Carole Batten-Phelps goes further, suggesting that Tolkien had come to view *The Lord of the Rings*, if not exactly as Divinely inspired, then certainly as a gift from Elsewhere (*Letters* 413, #328). Regarding the destruction of the Ring in particular, a 1956 letter to the reviewer Michael Straight links it thematically to a familiar passage from the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (*Letters* 233, #181). Similar reflections can be found in the draft of a letter to Miss J. Burn (*Letters* 252, #191) and one sent to Amy Ronald (*Letters* 255, #195), both dated 1956 as well. These letters recall the final pages of Tolkien's essay *On Fairy-stories* (*OFS*):

> In such stories when the sudden 'turn' comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through. […] The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. […] But in the 'eucatastrophe' we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world. (76-77)

Thus, a chain of reasoning suggests itself: if the destruction of the Ring is the eucatastrophe of *The Lord of the Rings*, and if eucatastrophe is an aperture into the deep structure of reality, and if that deep structure is encapsulated in the Good News of Christianity, then the destruction of the Ring should be read as an entry-point into Christian truth. The fundamental religiosity of *The Lord of the Rings* is to be located, in the final instance, in this eucatastrophic glimpse of the Joy of the Resurrection. On this reading it is perfectly unsurprising that my younger self would draw a line between the secondary-world eucatastrophe at Mount Doom and the primary-world eucatastrophe at Golgotha. He was simply decoding the intended meaning.

My older self remains unconvinced. These arguments depend on a chain of hermeneutical, ideological, and theological moves which I do not believe hold up to careful scrutiny. What may be, in fact, a valid Christian interpretation of Tolkien's fiction is passed off as proof of evangelical intent. This assertion is founded in turn upon a construction of Tolkien as an unproblematically Christian author who implants a single, univocal meaning in his works which can be worked out by proper exegesis. Such an approach does

not do justice to my encounter with Tolkien's fiction and the complex, generative interactivity between his faith, my faith, and the text itself. It does not do justice to the thousands of other reader encounters with it, religious and otherwise, which do not collapse into theological exclusivism but nevertheless draw deep wells of meaning from the secondary world into which Tolkien invites us. Nor, as I hope to show, does it do justice to Tolkien's own stated intent regarding the interpretation of his works.

In this essay, I want to examine how Christian scholarship drafts Tolkien, the imperfect human sub-creator, to perform Michel Foucault's "author-function" by suppressing his tensions and contradictions and painting a figure whose life and works speak with a single, authoritative voice. I will show how this project is bound up with the doctrine of univocal biblical authority as a means by which to regulate orthodox and heretical interpretations of texts. Then, drawing on progressive Christian and Jewish hermeneutics and Tolkien's own writings on intent and the freedom of the reader, I will propose a theological framework for reading Tolkien that honors his Catholic foundations, the sub-creative integrity of his secondary world, and the religious diversity of the readers who find it so enchanting. In so doing, I am not seeking to dismiss all existing Christian interpretations of Middle-earth as incorrect. Nor is it my intent to enlist Tolkien as an unequivocal proponent of my favored positions of religious and interpretive pluralism. Rather, I want to offer a hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration which treats Tolkien as a traveling-companion on a journey into the heart of the myths that give our lives meaning, rather than a semi-divine figure before whom readers must prostrate themselves. In short, I want to take him seriously enough as an artist not to idolize him, and I want to take his secondary world seriously enough not to ventriloquize it. Having hopefully succeeded, I will loop back to that brisk April day in 2012 and take another look at my moment of eucatastrophic insight, to see if it might open any new horizons for exploring Middle-earth.

CONSTRUCTING TOLKIEN THE AUTHOR(ITY)

I am not the first scholar to critically examine the construction of authorship in Tolkien Studies. Writing nearly two decades ago, Michael Drout cautioned Tolkien scholars to interrogate our own hagiographical tendencies and abandon the quest for "a single, 'theological' meaning for Tolkien's works" ("Towards a Better Tolkien Criticism" ["Towards"] 21). Verlyn Flieger's superb essays "But What Did He Really Mean?" and "The Arch and the Keystone" take up Drout's challenge, as does the work of Dallas John Baker and Robin A. Reid. Nor am I the first scholar to explore the complex construction of authorship in Tolkien's own works: Megan Abrahamson, Mary Bowman, Patrick Brückner, Owen Dugan and James Krasner, Judith Klinger, Benjamin Saxton, and Dennis

Wilson Wise all precede me there. My approach builds on theirs, first by working out the theological ramifications of that construction and then by theologically deconstructing it. For clarity, then, I distinguish in this essay between Tolkien the author to refer to the historically specific human being who wrote the works published under his name, and Tolkien the Author(ity) to refer to the discursive and ideological figure pieced together from those works. I take Austin Freeman's book *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth* (2022) as an exemplary text in the construction of this latter Tolkien, for two reasons. The first is that it is an excellent recent example of the type of Christian scholarship I mentioned above: it synthesizes a vast array of primary and secondary sources and presents itself as something of a "one-stop shop" for readers interested in Tolkien's beliefs on any number of theological subjects. The second reason is that whereas the construction of Tolkien the Author(ity) often serves as the unremarked background in Christian studies, Freeman makes his project explicit. Examining the means by which he brings that project to fruition will enable us to identify the same rhetorical and interpretive processes at work in the body of Christian Tolkien scholarship as a whole.

Freeman presents Tolkien as a theologian with "something to say about virtually every aspect of a traditionally structured systematic theology" (1). He admits that this runs up against Tolkien's reticence to preach or, for that matter, to accept the label *theologian*. It also runs up against the state of his writings, composed as they were for different audiences at different periods of his life and frequently left uncompleted and unpublished. Freeman thus needs to establish certain ground rules to generate "a cohesive, static, and unified picture of Tolkien's theology from the rapidly developing and widely disparate strands of his work" (15). He assumes that Tolkien's worldview remained relatively constant throughout his lifetime; he views his later works as more authoritative than his early ones; and, crucially, he privileges Tolkien's nonfiction, especially his letters, because these non-narrative writings "provide authorial guides to the proper theological interpretations of much of his fictional world" (16). Freeman appends an important footnote to this statement about "proper" interpretation:

> [R]eadings based on the theory of Foucault and Barthes will probably disagree with the very basis of my method here, but it is not the purpose of this book to provide a theory of literary criticism. Needless to say, citing Tolkien's letters 'at excruciating length' here can be the proper choice when seeking to preserve Tolkien's own voice, and there are numerous references to his fiction and other works that balance my approach. (373)

The comment about citing letters at excruciating length is a reference to the same Drout essay I quoted at the beginning of this section, with its caution against using Tolkien's letters to generate a singular meaning for his work. Freeman describes his own approach as "the now controversial view that an author's intent ought to be, well, authoritative" (8). He thus acknowledges upfront that his project is undergirded by a theory of texts and interpretation which accords pride of place to authorial intent and explicitly contrasts this with a Foucauldian approach. He has made a conscious hermeneutical choice which will foundationally inform the theological method he is about to employ, yet it is not a choice he feels any apparent need to defend. In the very act of acknowledging that other hermeneutics exist, he summarily dismisses them. I would therefore like to introduce Foucault's essay "What Is an Author?" to get a better sense of what Freeman is rejecting.

In everyday speech we are used to talking about an author quite transparently as the historically specific writer of a given text. When we say "J.R.R. Tolkien is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*," this is typically what we mean. Foucault problematizes this simple equation with his formulation of the *author-function*. The name of an author is not simply a proper noun with a single, identifiable referent; it is a frame for the texts which are ascribed to it, a heuristic "to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. […] [T]he name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text" (210-211). In order to fulfill this function, the author must be reconstructed from the traces of them which we find in the texts that are attributed to them, alongside biographical details, epitextual sources such as interviews and letters, and paratextual materials, which I follow Mia Consalvo in defining as "all of the elements surrounding a text that help structure it and give it meaning" (21). The discursively constituted author is less a person than an interpretive schema. They unify diverse texts and provide an ultimate reference-point for determining whether or not a given text is genuine and, crucially, whether or not a given reading is authoritative – that is to say, whether it whether it accords with the authorial intent of a consistent, stylistically and philosophically unified figure whose authorship grants the work a certain *authority* (Foucault 214-215) But this putative intent is a (re)construction just as much as the figure of the author themselves, depending on a chain of inference, interpretation, and systematization to produce a "cohesive, static, and unified" intent for a "cohesive, static, and unified" author. These twinned processes are always linked to identifying and regulating "proper" and "improper" readings. The historically specific human author has thus been transformed into a discursive, ideological Author(ity). This is what Foucault means by his oft-

quoted dictum that "the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (221).

Freeman's method for the exploration and explication of Tolkien's theology is a conscious and forthright example of Foucauldian Author(ity)-construction. He presents Tolkien's letters as a self-explanatory guide to his conscious intent during the process of composition, which is itself a problematic maneuver (Drout, "Towards" 20, Hutton 58-59). However, he seldom quotes Tolkien's words directly, relying almost exclusively on paraphrases and glosses. This becomes problematic when he seamlessly stitches together fictional and nonfictional sources which are disparate in time, style, and intended audience, all whilst failing to distinguish between published works and rejected variants, letters drafted and letters sent. He then fills in the numerous gaps in Tolkien's written corpus with orthodox Western Christian theological propositions. The issue is not necessarily that Tolkien would have rejected these propositions had they been presented to him; the issue is that his actual writings do not directly address them. If such propositions are to be found there, they must be dug for, that is, they must be *interpreted.* Herein lies the most serious problem with Freeman's method: he presents theological interpretations of Tolkien's fiction as if they were self-evidently the *correct* interpretation, whilst alternative readings are banished to footnotes if they are mentioned at all. These editorial practices are mutually reinforcing, keyed to produce a "cohesive, static, and unified" Tolkien which can exercise the author-function in the way Freeman wants him to.

His treatment of the "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth" is paradigmatic. Written in the late 1950s, this fictive debate between Finrod the Noldorin prince and Andreth the human wisewoman touches upon one of the central theological issues of Tolkien's work: human mortality. Within the legendarium, death is repeatedly referred to as the Gift of Ilúvatar, to the point that when the Númenórians attempt to "return" the Gift and wrest immortality from the Valar by force, their rebellion results in civilizational and cosmological cataclysm. Here the tension between the theology of Tolkien's secondary world and Christian theology in the primary world is so marked that even Freeman must acknowledge it (313-314): orthodox Western Christianity, in its Augustinian reading of Genesis 2-3, sees death not as a gift but a curse, introduced into the world through human disobedience. Tolkien hedged this disjuncture by pointing out that the "the point of view of the whole cycle is the Elvish" (*Letters* 147, #131), so the idea of death as a Gift could be ascribed to the immortal Elves who envy Men their ability escape the circles of the world. Flieger views the "Athrabeth" as unresolved, perhaps intentionally so. By contemplating the nature of mortality in a debate between two non-Christian characters, one mortal and the other immortal, Tolkien is able to raise a serious theological

question and explore it without needing to answer it outright. He can push at the boundaries of orthodoxy without foreclosing either on Christian doctrine *or* the internal logic of his invented world; deciding between the disputants is left to the reader. Tolkien himself wondered whether the "Athrabeth" might be taken as a "parody of Christianity" (*Morgoth's Ring* 354) and if he hadn't strayed too far into primary-world theologizing. Flieger dissents, asking:

> Or are his mythos and that of Christianity simply trying each in its own way to do the same thing, to answer with whatever means are at hand the same cosmic questions, to find a way to derive meaning from the terrible and beautiful Middle-earth in which we live and have our being? ("Whose Myth Is It?" 109)

It would hardly be the first time that Tolkien had deliberately chosen the ambiguity of a fictional debate over the ostensive clarity of a philosophical proposition. Elsewhere Flieger shows how he worked through several versions of a conversation between Sam, Frodo, Legolas, and Aragorn upon the company's departure from Lothlórien, as they try to figure out why their subjective experience of time within the borders of the Golden Wood differ from the objective passage of time outside its borders. After multiple attempts to set up and justify time-schemes for "inside" and "outside," Tolkien ultimately decided to leave the debate, and the mystery, unresolved (Flieger, *A Question of Time* 103-107). I agree with her that he has done same thing with the "Athrabeth."

Freeman, on the other hand, simply collapses the ambiguity and reads the "Athrabeth" backward through orthodox theology. According to Western Christian doctrine, death is the consequence of original sin. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. His "mature view of death" (Freeman 319) must have been consonant with that doctrine. It is this view which his fiction transparently illustrates in turn. It therefore follows that the intended meaning of the "Athrabeth," the one that "Tolkien" wanted us to find, is the one which accords fully with the Catholic beliefs we have reconstructed. We can rest assured that these were always perfectly orthodox and never contradictory; any apparent theological paradoxes in his work can be resolved by a "correct" reading of the work in question. By a logic positively ringlike in its circularity, Tolkien's personal beliefs, orthodox doctrine, and the theology of Middle-earth are presented as self-identical. Here is the Foucauldian author-function at work: Tolkien the "cohesive, static, and unified" Christian Author(ity) comes to act as the "principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning," ratifying a particular reading of his work while delegitimizing readings which do not conform to the authorial-intentional frame. Freeman does not simply act in the scribe-like role he claims for himself. He actively constructs a Tolkien who thinks what he

presents him as thinking, then by a kind of hermeneutical alchemy re-presents those thoughts as conscious authorial intentions which are embedded in Tolkien's fiction.

The deconstruction of Freeman's method now enables us to see how many other Christian commentators reproduce the same discursive and hermeneutical moves. Birzer's selective deployment of Tolkien's letters to support Roman Catholic integralism make imminent sense in these terms. At one point he asserts that King Elessar's ascension to the joint throne of Gondor and Arnor is an intentional fictional analogue for the political resurrection of the Holy Roman Empire (43 ff.). In support he cites Tolkien's 1967 letter to interviewers Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, but that is not what the letter actually says. There, Tolkien takes issue with the Plimmers' characterization of Middle-earth as Nordic, which he rejects both because it is geographically inaccurate and also because of the word's associations with Nazism. In fact, he points out, "[t]he North was the seat of the fortresses of the Devil. The progress of the tale ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome than anything that would be devised by a 'Nordic'" (*Letters* 376, #294). As becomes clear with context, Tolkien is not saying that *The Return of the King* is intended as a statement of support for the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire, only that it is *more like* such a restoration than supposedly "Nordic" alternatives. In the place of what Tolkien actually said, Birzer presents his interpretation of what he said, divorced from the context which might problematize it.

Pearce follows suit in his biography when he excoriates Humphrey Carpenter for his frankly uncontroversial intimation that the emotional trauma of the early loss of Tolkien's mother Mabel may have played a role in his lifelong devotion to Roman Catholicism (Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* [*Biography*] 39). That Tolkien might have been attached to his childhood faith for any other reason than its self-evident truth is seemingly anathema to Pearce. It is not plausible, he writes,

> to suggest that a scholar as widely read and perceptive as Tolkien would cling blindly to a belief throughout his entire life out of loyalty to, or as a substitute for, a mother's love. […] Quite simply, and pseudo-psychology aside, Tolkien remained a Catholic for the simple if disarming reason that he believed Catholicism was true. (*Tolkien: Man and Myth* 23)

Owen Dudley Edwards repeats Pearce's charge for identical reasons: "Tolkien's Catholicism was fused with his identity at the most basic points of self-awareness. Clichés about the influence of devout mothers do not begin to describe the force of an inheritance like this" (28). Carpenter's *Biography* is not beyond reproach in every respect, but in order for these arguments to work, the

hint of anything but certitude in Tolkien's religiosity, any emotional or otherwise "non-religious" factors in his faith, must be expelled. If Tolkien was not himself "cohesive, static, and unified" then the works that flowed from his pen might not be "cohesive, static, and unified" either – in other words, they might admit more than one valid interpretation. This is likewise the foundation of Donald Williams's rejoinder to Flieger's "The Arch and the Keystone," in which he argues that her portrait of Tolkien as a complicated and at times contradictory figure reflects a regrettable misunderstanding Tolkien's of "singular self" and equally singular "biblical" worldview (215-216). He replaces Flieger's image of the keystone held in place between opposing forces with the explicitly Christian metaphor of the cornerstone (225). A similar dynamic is at work in Claudio Testi's subsumption of the dynamic interplay between the Christian and Pagan elements of the legendarium into a "synthetic" framework of Christian supersessionism (8). I could multiply examples at length, but I hope my point has been made: in order to have a single coherent "biblical" worldview which can undergird a single coherent "biblical" interpretation, Tolkien must be strategically purged of all inconsistencies which threaten that coherence.

The construction of Foucauldian authorship is far from an exclusively Christian enterprise, in Tolkien Studies or anywhere else, but for much of the history of Western Christianity it has been linked directly to the maintenance of biblical authority. Foucault traces its genealogy back to St. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible (214). In the fourth century CE during which Jerome lived, Christianity was formalizing its scriptural canon, a process which would conclude at the Council of Rome in 382 CE. This required establishing certain criteria by which to accept some texts as authoritative and reject others; Foucault argues that modern literary criticism still uses many of the same guiding assumptions as Jerome and his canon-setting contemporaries. Theologian George Aichele concurs, writing that "[t]he claim that the biblical texts have been marked by God is an older version of modern secular belief that a book's author controls the text's connotations through the process of writing it—with readers obliged to respect the author's intention" (62). This process of Author(ity)-construction is an ideological move on the part of the imperial Church to establish interpretive hegemony over the canon, the very establishment of which is part of the same project (cf. Thomassen 19-21). The canon circumscribes not only the texts which are treated as authoritative but also introduces an "ideological metatext of the Bible understood as a unified whole. The Bible is understood to transmit a single message with a single meaning: for Christians, all of the biblical books speak clearly together, a single truth" (Aichele 46). It is no accident that Christianity's transformation into a hegemonic imperial Church takes place at precisely the same moment that the authoritative biblical canon is established, and by extension a single

authoritative *meaning* of that canon; for this is precisely the means by which heresy can be identified and punished. Wedded to institutional power, dogmatic theology now functions to uphold correct doctrine and discipline incorrect doctrine—that is, to stanch the proliferation of theological meaning. The controlling intent of a single controlling Author(ity) must be maintained, even if it means suppressing the multivocality of the biblical texts themselves.

Writing to debates over whether LGBTQ+ persons have a place in the full life and ministry of the Church, queer Bible scholar Mary Ann Tolbert shows how the doctrine of biblical authority continues to exercise the same disciplinary function in contemporary discourse. First, it treats the Bible as transcendent and ahistorical, authoritative at all times in exactly the same way, regardless of historical and cultural circumstances. Second, it selectively idealizes and normalizes the worldview of the authors of these texts, especially with regard to gender and sexuality, and then judges the present in terms of these reified worldviews. Third, its modus operandi is *proof-texting*, that is, stringing together quotations without context, thereby implying that words written at different times, by different people under different circumstances, all "say the same thing." Fourth, it constructs a single, regulatory meaning of the text: the Bible becomes univocal and therefore authoritative (Tolbert 176-182). However—and this is her crucial point—this meaning is derived, not from the plain sense of the text, but rather from a particular reading, from a particular social location, wielding an extra-biblical hermeneutic which fundamentally misunderstands the nature of texts. "Unless the Divine author also controls the reading of the text," she writes, "the very medium chosen for the text, that of language with its inherent indeterminacy and ambiguity, undercuts the singularity and directness of communication" (181). She could easily be describing the "doctrine" of Tolkienian Author(ity) I outlined above.

As I hope to have shown, this is no coincidence. The problematic assertion of authorial intent that pervades Christian Tolkien scholarship is founded upon the equally problematic construction of Tolkien as a Christian Author(ity). This in turn requires the elision and suppression of inconvenient complexities in Tolkien's own statements as well as in the stories he wrote and the secondary world he created, suturing together texts written at different times for different audiences and collapsing ambiguities to support a favored Christian reading. The hermeneutics of biblical authority is effectively transferred from the Christian canon to Tolkien's legendarium. The construction of Tolkien's "singular self"—cohesive, static, and unified in his conservative Roman Catholic Christianity—is thus unmasked as not simply an ideological but also a *theological* project. This raises an important question: why are we treating *The Lord of the Rings* like the Bible? And as much to the point: why are we treating Tolkien like God?

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF TOLKIENIAN INSPIRATION

At this point I wish to make a clarification: I am emphatically *not* arguing that all Christian Tolkien scholarship is ideologically poisoned from the get-go. Christian scholarly readings of Tolkien are not wrong *as readings*. They are, for the most part, perfectly fair interpretations which can be supported by the text to greater and lesser extents; I find many of them well-reasoned, even inspiring. It is the move from *a* valid interpretation to *the* valid interpretation with which I take issue, the reconstruction and reification of a singular authorial intent by the reconstruction and reification of a singular Author(ity) who can transparently communicate that intent. Moreover, all knowledge is situated, influenced by the intertwined experiences, beliefs, and social locations of the knower (cf. Haraway 590). I do not and cannot expect fellow Christians to abandon the faith which is so central to their identity when they come to the page. Nor, if they subscribe to the doctrine of biblical authority, can I expect them to disregard their most deeply held beliefs about Scripture, though I happen to disagree with them. My plea to my fellow Christian Tolkien scholars is somewhat different and more limited: that we might abandon an absolutist hermeneutics of authorial intent *for the purposes of reading and studying Tolkien*. This raises a question: "Are we supposed to completely disregard Tolkien's faith then?" My answer here is an equally emphatic *no*. Even if everything I have written so far is true—even if my reader agrees with my theological deconstruction of authorial intent and the way in which this is deployed in Christian Tolkien scholarship—J.R.R. Tolkien was nevertheless a committed Christian who described his masterwork as "fundamentally religious and Catholic" (*Letters* 172, #142). Moreover, much Christian Tolkien criticism, including much of what I have cited above for the purposes of critique, eloquently and convincingly demonstrates the profound influence of Tolkien's Roman Catholicism on his literary sub-creation. So am I, in effect, arguing for the death of the author (Barthes 147)?

I will respond by agreeing with Dimitra Fimi that "[o]ne of the problems of bypassing the author is the rendering of literature as a-historical and self-contained. To state the obvious: every text has an author with a life beyond the text, defined by a specific place and historical circumstances" (6). Appropriately then, this is the point at which I wish to turn from Tolkien's construction in Christian scholarship to Tolkien the man. Or rather, to his works, since neither I nor most living commentators have ever had any unmediated contact with him. I wish to put Tolkien's writings on intent and interpretation into conversation with a different model of theological hermeneutics, one that embraces multiple interpretations not merely as an unavoidable feature of reading texts but as a positive theological good. I hope to offer a mode of encountering Middle-earth which does not kill Tolkien the author, the brilliant

and imperfect human being who wrote the stories that bring me and millions of others so much joy, but which *does* dethrone Tolkien the Author(ity). In fact, I argue that this approach respects Tolkien more, not less, than approaches which place him upon an authoritative pedestal.

Flieger has shown how, far from elucidating his work, the construction of Tolkien the Author(ity) massages away the dynamic tensions which make him such a compelling figure and which make his work so powerful for such a wide audience ("Arch" 17-18, "But What Did He Really Mean?" ["Really Mean"] 150-151). My contention, which builds upon hers, is that flattening Tolkien's beliefs (or anyone's) into a fully "cohesive, static, and unified" Roman Catholicism also fails to capture the unique complexity of lived religion. Meredith McGuire defines *lived religion* as "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives" (12). Simply ascribing a religious label to someone tells us remarkably little about their actual religious convictions and the way in which those convictions shape up in their lives as they are lived. The preoccupation with beliefs which can be expressed propositionally and accepted or rejected, while it has roots in Christian history, is in fact a thoroughly modern, Western, Protestant, masculinist view of religion. In their historical and contemporary studies of women's spirituality, McGuire (57 ff.) and Collen McDannell (139-140) demonstrate how this cognitivist bias systematically denigrates believers and traditions which are grounded in material, embodied, and relational practices more than voluntaristic intellectual belief. This marginalizes and pathologizes women's religion in particular, but also any practices or traditions which are seen as insufficiently rational, including Roman Catholicism (cf. Orsi 9-12, Taylor 25-30). It also assumes that a person's religious belief remains static so long as they apply the same label to it. The truth, however, is that lived religions are dynamic, syncretic, and subject to change over time.

No doubt J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. He was also a layperson and in no way considered himself a systematic theologian. The Sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, were always far more central to Tolkien's faith than biblical or doctrinal interpretation (Carpenter, *The Inklings* 154). Moreover, he was a widely read man who lived during a period of tremendous social upheaval and intellectual diversity. Like the words with which Tolkien was professionally and creatively preoccupied, religion is always a palimpsest, a series of writings and rewritings, erasures and adaptations, meanings which accrete and transform with time and use (Holmes 130-131). Even if the label he used to describe it remained constant, Tolkien would be very unusual indeed if his relationship to his faith did not change and grow over time. His placement at any given moment along the continuum from faith to

doubt, from hope to despair, from rational defense of his faith to sacramental participation in it, would have shifted depending on any number of factors: mood, life circumstance, who he was with at the time. This seems to me the thrust of Carpenter's characterization of "two Tolkiens," based on his near-exclusive access to the private diaries which preserve Tolkien's moments of existential anguish in writing (*Biography* 39). To demand a one-to-one correspondence between official doctrine and lived religion is a modern, cognitivist misrepresentation of what it means to be religious in the first place. In Tolkien's case, it is to demand that he become a campaign surrogate for particular brand of theologically conservative Roman Catholicism rather than a human being who struggled with faith and doubt like the rest of us mere mortals.

The construction of an uncomplicatedly religious authorial intent which hovers gnostically in the background, meant to be decoded by readers "in the know," doesn't merely erase Tolkien's exceedingly human religious complexity; it also contradicts Tolkien's repeated statements about intentionality. His 1955 letter to W.H. Auden is exemplary in this regard:

> *The Lord of the Rings* as a story was finished so long ago now that I can take a largely impersonal view of it, and find 'interpretations' quite amusing; even those that I might make myself, which are mostly *post scriptum*: I had very little particular, conscious, intellectual, intention in mind at any point. (*Letters* 211, #163)

In a footnote he describes how the Ents seemed to intrude upon the work almost independently of his own volition, which reflects "my feeling throughout, especially when stuck, that I was not inventing but reporting (imperfectly) and had at times to wait till 'what really happened' came through" (*Letters* 212, #161). This will sound familiar to any writer of fiction who has come to feel as though their story and its characters have taken on a life of their own. It resonates as well with Tolkien's remarks during the actual composition of the text, as in a 1944 letter to Christopher Tolkien where he says of Faramir's first appearance that "I am sure I did not invent him, I did not even want him, though I like him, but there he came walking into the woods of Ithilien" (*Letters* 79, #66). Statements of this kind complicate the idea of a controlling authorial intent for any work of fiction which can be established with anything like doctrinal certainty. Tolkien himself correlates this ambiguity of intent to a certain openness to interpretation: "what appreciative readers have got out of the work or seen in it has seemed fair enough, even when I do not agree with it. […] Anyway most people that have enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* have been affected primarily by it as an exciting story; and that is how it was written" (*Letters* 212, #161). This is reiterated in a 1955 letter to his American publisher Houghton

Mifflin, which Tolkien wrote as a resource for reviewers and other commentators; we can safely infer that the views expressed in it are the ones he wished to represent to the reading public. Here he explicitly denies that Middle-earth is a Christian world, despite his own professed beliefs, and describes it rather as "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'" (*Letters* 220, #165). In response "to people who ask me 'what is it all about?'" Tolkien replies firmly: "It is not 'about' anything but itself" (*Letters* 220, #165). The draft of the letter to reviewer Michael Straight which I quoted in my introduction says much the same thing: even as Tolkien offers a possible Christian interpretation of Frodo's temptation and deliverance at the Crack of Doom, he reaffirms that *LotR* "was written to *amuse* (in the highest sense): to be readable. There is *no* 'allegory', moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all" (*Letters* 232, #181). Of course, "something of the teller's own reflections and 'values' will inevitably get worked in" (*Letters* 233, #181)—but that is not at all the same thing.

These public-facing comments contrast with Tolkien's private letters which affirm Christian interpretations advanced by others, as in the famed 1953 letter to Robert Murray, not to speak of the frequently unsent drafts which ventured too far into "theological disquisition" for his own tastes (cf. Flieger "Really Mean" 151, Hutton 59). To his 1954 draft of a letter to the Catholic bookseller Peter Hastings, in which he defends his work against the accusation of *insufficient* Catholicism, Tolkien appended the note, "It seemed to be taking myself too importantly" (*Letters* 196, #153). Likewise the unsent continuation of a 1958 letter to Rhona Beare, in which Tolkien discusses the then-unpublished cosmological myth at the back of his legendarium. The letter, as sent, concludes as follows:

> Theologically (if the term is not too grandiose) I imagine the picture to be less dissonant from what some (including myself) believe to be the truth. But since I have deliberately written a tale, which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is *not* an allegory of them (or anything else), and does not mention them overtly, still less preach them, I will not now depart from that mode, and venture on theological disquisition for which I am not fitted. (*Letters* 283-284, #211)

Tolkien deliberately cut himself off before he could exegete his own work and rob it of its aesthetic and narrative power for readers. This is consistent with his view, influenced by Owen Barfield, that myth communicates truths which cannot be communicated in any other way (Houghton 8-10, Starr 10-11). Even in the famed 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien is careful to frame his meditations on the legendarium as "what (he thinks) he means or is trying to represent by it all" (*Letters* 143, #131). Moreover, as with most of Tolkien's philosophical and theological reflections on his stories, the Waldman letter was

written *after* the completion of the stories under discussion. In a forthcoming book on Pity in Middle-earth, Thomas Hillman argues compellingly that this letter represents a turning-point in Tolkien's creative career, as the mythopoesis of the early Silmarillion through *The Lord of the Rings* gives way to the philosophical and theological interpretation of the mythology which took up much of the remainder of Tolkien's life. The Waldman letter itself supports this reading, as does a 1958 letter to C. Ouboter (*Letters* 267, #208) where Tolkien admits that it was only looking back on the completed work that he began to discern its thematic coherence.

A pattern emerges: whatever he said in private letters, J.R.R. Tolkien evinced a hesitancy to broadcast an explicitly Christian reading of his work. In his public statements, he was far more concerned that *The Lord of the Rings* be accepted on its own merits as a story than that it be interpreted "correctly." Nowhere is this clearer than in his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings,* which is by far the most public statement Tolkien ever made on the subject, read by untold millions of his readers since it first appeared in print.

> The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them. […] As for any inner meaning or 'message', it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. […] I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (*LotR* "Foreword to the Second Edition xxiii-xxiv)

Up to this point I have argued against proof-texting and imposing cohesion where it is not supported by the text. I do not intend to abandon that method now. I leave it up to my reader which of Tolkien's statements on the relationship between his writings and his religion they take as normative. But considering the pattern of public-facing statements he actually made, Tolkien seems consistent to me in this much: he values the freedom of the reader too much to force them into the "narrow channel of finding a single, 'theological' meaning for [his] works" (Drout, "Towards" 21). To the extent that it can be inferred, Tolkien's intent would appear to be that readers take *LotR* on its own terms rather than as an illustration of some cognitive-propositional concept external to the world of the text.

So much for authorial intent. What about the "freedom of the reader"? How do we navigate the tricky interplay of writer, reader, and text? Can we

keep Tolkien the storyteller without Tolkien the Author(ity)? And how do we account for the power of these stories in a way which does not make exclusivist theological claims whilst still acknowledging the faith of the man who wrote them and the validity of Christian interpretations? It seems to me undeniable that Tolkien's stories move those of us who love them in ways whose best analogue may in fact be religious. Martin Barker, Patrick Curry, Catherine Madsen, and Stephen Morillo have all written of Tolkien's work in such terms; Michael Drout goes so far as to say that "probably contrary to all of Tolkien's intensions, *The Silmarillion* entered into that part of my psyche in which [sic] the stories of Eden or Canaan or the wanderings of the Israelites must occupy in others'" ("Reflections on Thirty Tears of Reading *The Silmarillion*" 55). That feeling is shared by many of Tolkien's readers—including, in some important respects, myself. But to that I will return in a moment. The question remains: can we have a pluralist theological hermeneutics for Tolkien scholarship?

I believe we can; or at least, I do, and I want to offer it to other Tolkien scholars, religious and nonreligious alike, as another interpretive tool in our field's diverse toolbox. To return to Tolbert: over and against the hermeneutics of biblical authority she proposes a hermeneutics of *biblical inspiration*. She draws for this formulation on the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, in which meaning is co-constructed by the merger of horizons between the text (and, by extension, its author) and the reader. Reading is a dialogical encounter, a co-creative process, rather than an uncomplicated transfer of meaning from author to reader (183-184). Tolkien gets at something similar when he writes in Footnote E to "On Fairy-stories" that readers must bring their own imagination, their own memories and emotions and lived experiences, to the work of making meaning with the textual resources placed at their disposal by the author. The same words, the same story, are never read the same way twice: Middle-earth looks and feels different to each reader, even to the same reader upon subsequent readings. Nor is the significance each of us draws from the text precisely the same; it is generated in dialogue with the text and with the artist who brought it into the world (cf. Hall 515-517). For Tolbert, the Bible is inspired in the act of its writing by imperfect humans grappling with faith in their own lives and historical circumstances, *and* in the act of its reading by imperfect humans doing the same thing (183). Within such a hermeneutic, it is possible to view the Bible as at once a testament to an encounter with the Divine *and* a fallible human document. The question is no longer simply "What does the Bible say?" The Bible says many things, not all of which can be easily harmonized with each other without doing violence to the integrity of the myriad texts which make up the canon. The problem of interpretation cannot be deferred by reference to the transcendentally ahistorical authority of the text (cf. Drout &

Wynne 107); the text must be encountered and grappled with, engaging not only the horizons of its authors but also the horizons of its readers.

The hermeneutics of biblical inspiration resonates with the Jewish interpretive tradition of Midrash. I want to be careful here not to appropriate the practice of a religious community to which I do not belong; I have learned much from my Jewish spouse, her family, and the Jewish communities of which we are a part. In my understanding of it, Midrash holds the presence of God in and beyond the text in dynamic tension with real, not suppressed, textual inconsistencies and lacunae as well as the lived experiences of interpreters. The friction between different texts and different perspectives becomes the spark for the generation of new meaning and insight beyond blithe theological certainties. Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim describes Midrash in terms of dual "stubbornness." On the one hand there is the stubbornness of Torah itself, the bearer of the "root experiences" of Judaism which have served as the basis of religious life for centuries and which must be confronted. On the other hand there is the stubbornness of the interpretive community, which refuses to abandon either the truth of its own experience *or* the witness of the text (Fackenheim 20-21; cf. Barenblat 172, Stahlberg 323-234). Henry F. Knight draws on Fackenheim when he describes Midrashic reading as

> a dialectical form of narrative resistance. Dwelling within the biblical story, those faithful to the narrated root experience (e.g., the gift of Torah at Sinai) raise probing questions generated in their own unfolding reality and pose them to the root events themselves, pushing and resisting the very story they trust. […] At the same time, the story and its root experience resist the questions being posed to them by providing the framework and vantage points for raising such questions. (4-5)

The goal is not to generate a doctrinally correct reading of the text but rather to explore the world of the text with others, receptive to the ways in which such encounters can challenge and enrich us. Far from an authoritative universality, the text opens onto *pluriversal* encounters with narrative religiosity (cf. Perry 298). Knight cautions against Christians simply appropriating another tradition's hermeneutic, inviting us instead to read "midrashically" (11), that is, in constant dialogue with those Others who journey alongside us through the Bible's story-world. There is a Midrashic saying: *Shiv'im Panim laTorah*, "Torah has seventy faces." Not only does the text permit multiple, even contradictory, readings; multiple readings are necessary to release its full transformative power. Until and unless we have seen the text's many faces, we have not really seen it at all. One might even say that God intends the text to be read and interpreted in this open-ended way. By way of contrast, extratextual dogmatisms and doctrines

> too easily become distinct realities that, in their turn, measure the text. They replace the narrated world of the text with a monolithic rendering of that world. The multifaceted richness of that world is reduced; its texture is lost. We replace the text with meaning we abstract from it. (Knight 14)

He could just as easily be writing about Middle-earth.

I propose that we can apply the hermeneutics of textual inspiration to reading Tolkien—a *hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration,* if you will. Tolkien, in this framework, is not a univocal Author(ity) but instead a human being whose voice informs the dialogue of meaning without dominating the conversation. This more nuanced understanding of authorship and readership holds space for the complexities in Tolkien's life and works without forcing us to abandon the religious (or nonreligious) significance we find there. The merger of multiple horizons authorizes interpretations as diverse as the readers who bring their lived experiences to the text while still honoring the integrity of the story and its teller. It enables us to engage in willing secondary belief and enter fully into Middle-earth at the same time as it grants us leave to challenge what we find there. This Midrashic stubbornness involves the practice of *critical joy,* which "entails the transparent discussion of how a text reflects systemic issues whilst *also potentially celebrating* its affordances and nuances" (Lavezzo & Rios Maldonado 243-244, emphasis original). This is crucial in our field's present climate, in which non-Christian, LGBTQ+, POC, and other marginalized Tolkien scholars can receive abuse and even death threats from extremist fans, simply for advancing readings of Tolkien that transcend the authorial-intentional frame. These attacks are often justified under cover of respecting Tolkien's intentions for his work, constructing not only Tolkien as Author(ity) but also the attackers themselves as his true defenders (Reid 207-211). Tolbert responds to rhetorically analogous attacks on queer Christians this way: "The pressing question is not whether *Paul* believed these things, but whether or not *we* do" (174). The question for us, as Tolkien fans and scholars, is not whether Tolkien believed these things, but whether or not *we* do. We do not have access to the man himself to adjudicate our debates, but the stories remain. All we have to decide, then, is what to do with the stories that are given us.

While a hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration is based on progressive Christian and Jewish methods of biblical reading, its deep pluralism and emphasis on wrestling with the text rather than discerning an authoritative meaning can find applicability beyond the realm of religious interpretation. For one thing, viewing the texts of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as a story-world into which believers can enter evokes tantalizing parallels between what we might call "religious worldbuilding" and the secondary worldbuilding

which Tolkien theorizes in "On Fairy-stories." I will not push the comparison too far in the limited space which remains; instead, I will reiterate that I am not seeking to convert other Christians away from their own traditions of biblical interpretation. That would contravene the spirit of my project; all of us could stand to practice a little more interpretive humility, myself included. But while my coreligionists might find it an unconvincing framework for reading Scripture, I hope they might nevertheless entertain a hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration for reading the legendarium. For all its deep religious plangency in our lives, it's still not quite the same thing as Holy Writ.

Conclusion: A Glimpse Reconsidered

It is a dangerous thing, imputing intentionality to a dead author; but it seems clear to me that what was most important to Tolkien is that we let his works—and, since they were the major works actually published during his lifetime, especially *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*—speak for themselves. Even if he believed them to contain a single theological meaning (and here the evidence does not convince me that he did, rather to the contrary), he also believed that the freedom of the reader to enter the story-world for themselves, to explore it and discern its applicability to their own lives, takes precedence of his or anyone else's right to tell them "what it really means." This is no mere matter of literary criticism; freedom for Tolkien is a foundational theological virtue, so central to his sub-created world that Ilúvatar is willing to risk the possibility of Arda Marred in order to uphold it (Dickerson 115). In any case, I think it unlikely that Tolkien would have approved of using his letters, which were never meant for wide public consumption, as "distinct realities that, in their turn, measure the text […] [and] replace the narrated world of the text with a monolithic rendering of that world" (Knight 14). As Tolkien himself said of *The Lord of the Rings*: "It is not 'about' anything but itself" (*Letters* 220, #165).

To the extent that Tolkien's intent can be reconstructed—and as his letters amply demonstrate, such a thing is not always clear to the storyteller *in media res* or even *post scriptum*—I contend that he wished us to treat his work not as a semi-divine work of crypto-evangelism but as a thoroughly human work of sub-creation. Encountering it as a work of art which we can admire despite (or perhaps even because of) its inconsistencies and imperfections permits it to move us in ways that we might well describe as spiritual, even if we do not share the ontic commitments of the artist (Taylor 400-401). Practicing hermeneutical generosity is, paradoxically, a way of honoring Tolkien's intent. I go further: we disrespect Tolkien when we make him an idol. Instead of a human being who lived and breathed and loved and believed and struggled and suffered failure and achieved success and fought the long defeat, he is rendered a mere theological caricature or an ideological puppet. His work is made less too: no

longer an enchantment, a secondary world in which readers can have powerful experiences of terror and delight, it becomes a substitution cypher, a theology machine into which one feeds characters, places, narratives, and out the other end come neat doctrinal propositions to accept or reject, purged of the inconvenient complexities that made them unique and interesting and *enchanting* in the first place. Tolkien the storyteller, Tolkien the man, is assassinated, the unfortunate but necessary victim of a grand project of hermeneutical hegemony. In his place is enthroned Tolkien the Author(ity), God-King of a secondary world sapped of all meaning and possibility but that which steers the reader into dogmatic orthodoxy. Tom Shippey has shown the profoundly philological character of Tolkien's creative process, reconstructing "asterisk-realities" from the traces of ancient legends just as a philologist reconstructs "asterisk-words" from the traces of ancient languages (17-19 ff.). Perhaps Tolkien himself is the ultimate asterisk-reality at the back of his stories: a product of imagination and surmise, inferable but ultimately unrecoverable.

And what of those stories? I have spent this essay insisting that we read Tolkien's fiction on its own terms but have barely touched upon the fiction itself, relying instead (and thoroughly ironically) on his nonfiction for my line of argument. To conclude, then, I want to return to April 2012, to the bluffs of the Missouri River and the eucatastrophic insight with which I began. Reading through a hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration, I do not believe that I had stumbled at last upon the "correct" interpretation of Frodo's climactic confrontation with Gollum at the Crack of Doom, the one which its author had encoded for me to find there. Had I sensed Tolkien intending to convert me to Christianity, even subtly, I would have been insulted. Instead, the scene had always moved me to tears in ways which had nothing to do with religion *per se*. The exquisite artistry with which it weaves together every character beat, every plot thread, every narrative theme both latent and explicit, into a heart-skipping, breath-catching vindication of vulnerability and hope in the face of despair and overwhelming will to power, the sheer unexpected *obviousness* of it, had been a cornerstone of my moral imagination since the age of ten. Rather than interpreting *The Lord of the Rings* through the lens of Christian theology, I was doing what Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis call narrative analysis, thinking *with* the story instead of simply thinking *about* it (185-186). I was interpreting *Christianity* through the lens of *The Lord of the Rings*. The religious world of the Christian New Testament and the secondary world of Tolkien's legendarium mutually illuminated each other without collapsing into one another. The story had so thoroughly worked itself into my narrative consciousness that *it* became the framework through which I made sense of my newfound faith, and not the other way around. I was, in effect, doing theology with *The Lord of the Rings.*

Looking back now, I would say that the "peculiar quality of the 'joy'" which I found in both stories offered indeed "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (OFS 77). Where I would differ with many Christian interpreters—and with Tolkien himself—is in naming it as a reality to which both stories bear witness but on which neither has an exclusive monopoly. But that takes me well beyond the scope of the present essay. Instead, I will close with the words of Aragorn: "There, that is my tale. Others might be devised" (*LotR* III.5.490).

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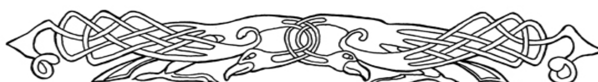

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