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Abstract

Attempts to explain exactly what Frodo goes to when he sails from the Grey Havens. By looking at paradise, purgatory, and earthly Edens in medieval literature and theology, we gain a better understanding of the spiritual purpose of Tolkien's "far green country" beyond the bent paths of the world. References "Pearl," "Sir Orfeo," mystery play cycles, and Sir John Mandeville's Travels, among other sources.

Additional Keywords

Afterlife in J.R.R. Tolkien; Earthly paradise in J.R.R. Tolkien; Purgatory in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Medieval period; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Cosmology; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle"; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings

♦♦ A FAR GREEN COUNTRY": TOLKIEN, PARADISE, AND THE END OF ALL THINGS IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A. KEITH KELLY AND MICHAEL LIVINGSTON

IN A 1953 LETTER TO HIS JESUIT FRIEND, ROBERT MURRAY, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" (*Letters* 172), a well-known statement that has for many years inspired discussion, debate, and speculation by Tolkien's readers. While some critics have argued for the clear presence of a Christian morality in Middle-earth, others have asserted that any Christian influences are minimal and have little impact on the overall narrative, or even the characters' morality.¹ There seems to be precious little untrod ground in the arena of how Middle-earth does or does not express a Christian morality, and it is not our aim to enter that discussion here. However, the presence of a mythology within Middle-earth is undeniable, and there are aspects of that mythology that do invite further study. One particular element of Tolkien's mythology that has not been given full consideration is the mystery of the human afterlife and the ways in which Tolkien presents the idea of Paradise.

Critical statements made about the concept of Paradise in relation to Middle-earth have all been rather straight-forward: the Undying Lands are it. This opinion, however, overlooks a few key components of Tolkien's overall corpus. And if Tolkien's works are, as he asserts, fundamentally religious and Catholic, we might well expect to discover within his mythology some notion of the afterlife that is compatible with such beliefs. Certainly we will gain some insight into Tolkien's particular views of the afterlife and what it holds or what it promises—though the most surprising thing may just be what is *not* found in his portrait of Paradise.

¹ Though the topic of the Christian moral underpinnings of Tolkien's work has been covered by many critics, a recent overview can be found in Matthew Dickerson's *Following Gandalf* (2003). The other side of the critical coin might be seen, for example, in the relative paucity of religious sentiment among the essays collected in Robert Eaglestone's *Reading The Lord of the Rings* (2005).

For a moment let us consider Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*—not because Jackson is the final word on the matter, but simply because he offers an example of the popular view of Paradise in Tolkien's mythology. There is a scene about two hours into the theatrical release of *The Return of the King* that is rather revealing in this regard. Sauron's monstrous forces have taken the first few levels of Minas Tirith and now lay siege to the inner city. The camera pans through the ruined citadel with the cries of the dying in the background until we see that a troll, wielding a tremendous hammer, is knocking down what appears to be the last barricade protecting the defenders. Just inside that door, a few weary soldiers of Gondor wait, and we see the hobbit, Pippin, exhausted and afraid, sitting with Gandalf. As if to emphasize the overrunning of natural, humane life about to occur, a crate of apples is set behind Gandalf, and between him and Pippin, from the camera's perspective, sits a barrel, a few carefully groomed shrubs, and the dark green leaves and red flowers of a potted plant. It is a moment of impending doom for the world of men.

"I didn't think it would end this way," Pippin says quietly.

The scene is striking to this point not only cinematically, but also dramatically in that it is one of the filmmaker's many insertions into Tolkien's storyline. There's nothing at all quite like it in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, which never pauses in its action throughout this elaborate sequence of battle. But even more striking is what comes next in the film, as Gandalf responds: "End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path. One that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back and all turns to silver glass. And then you see it."

"What, Gandalf?" Pippin asks. "See what?"

The camera is close in on Gandalf's face now. His eyes shine with a look akin to wondrous mirth, and a smile seems to break at the corners of his mouth and eyes. "White shores," he replies in a slow but steady voice. He turns his head to look away from Pippin, seeming to gaze into a distance just off-camera, where we cannot see: "And beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise."

As Gandalf talks we see Pippin's face soften. Hope seems to wash over him. "Well, that isn't so bad," he says (Scene 49: "A Far Green Country").

In "Another Road to Middle-earth" Tom Shippey notes in a brief discussion of this scene that Gandalf's words are quite startling to anyone who has read the books closely (242). For while the scene is original to the film, Gandalf's description of a "far green country" is not. That image *is* Tolkien's, but transposed from elsewhere. In fact, the phrase occurs twice in *The Lord of the Rings*, once near the beginning and once near the very end of the epic. And it is the source and meaning of this imagery, along with its interpretation by critics,

among whom Jackson may be counted, that gives the clearest glimpse into Tolkien's depictions of Paradise.

The first occurrence of the "far green country" image in *The Lord of the Rings* [LoTR] text is during the hobbits' final night at the house of Tom Bombadil:

That night they heard no noises. But either in his dreams or out of them, he could not tell which, Frodo heard a sweet singing running in his mind: a song that seemed to come like a pale light behind a grey rain-curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under a swift sunrise.

The vision melted in waking; and there was Tom whistling like a tree-full of birds; and the sun was already slanting down the hill and through the open window. Outside everything was green and pale gold. (LoTR I.8.132)

The second instance of the phrase comes on the penultimate page of Tolkien's epic, nearly a thousand pages later.² Here, the hobbits have come to the Grey Havens on the firth of Lune in the company of Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf, and the legendary Círdan the Shipwright. The last of the Elves are leaving the shores of Middle-earth, and Frodo has been given the opportunity to leave with them, to cross the sea where, perhaps, he might find peace at last.³ Frodo takes leave of his friends, boards the White Ship, and vanishes beyond the horizon, beyond their sight. Tolkien gives us only a tantalizing glimpse of what Frodo experiences next:

And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, 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.

But to Sam the evening deepened to darkness as he stood at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West. (LoTR VI.9.1007)

² That Frodo's vision is meant to thus "frame" *The Lord of the Rings* is implied in how early Tolkien planned the repetition. In a letter to his son, dated 29 November 1944, long before he was at work writing this part of the epic, Tolkien writes: "But the final scene will be the passage of Bilbo and Elrond and Galadriel through the woods of the Shire on their way to the Grey Havens. Frodo will join them and pass over the Sea (linking with the vision he had of a far green country in the house of Tom Bombadil)" (*Sauron* 53).

³ For discussion of Frodo's psychological condition in the latter half of *The Lord of the Rings*, see Livingston, along with larger studies, such as those by Petty, especially 282, and Croft, especially 133-38.

Shippey notes that Tolkien's sudden turn to Sam, and the negative conjunction with which he does so, seems to distinguish Frodo's experience from that of the remainder of the Fellowship: "Sam turns back to death—and of course to life, to his wife and children, and to the mortality that goes with them. But one could believe, if one wished, that Frodo's fate and vision need not be confined to him alone, might be a possibility for all mortals," and it is precisely this possibility that Jackson suggests in his transposition of these scenes in his film adaptation ("Another Road" 242).

The underlying assumption of Jackson's treatment of this imagery, then, is that Frodo's destination, the "far green country," is a land beyond death, an after-life. Edmund Wainwright associates it with the "heathen tradition of ship-burial whereby the dead are thought to continue their lives on the far shore" (57-58). Orson Scott Card calls Frodo's final journey "a bittersweet parting, very much like death, very much like going to heaven" (167), and other critics have been more certain in their identification, equating the "far green country" simply and directly, as Jackson does, with Heaven.⁴ But is this necessarily the way Tolkien imagined it? And, if not, how exactly are we to understand such a place in our understandings of the world? After all, Tolkien was always careful to term his mythology as one that is ultimately meant to be associated with our world, fantastic though it might seem at times: "This is a story of long ago," he writes in the Foreword to *The Hobbit*; not, we should note, "a story of long ago in a galaxy far, far away" or the like. Thus Middle-earth's legends are connected to *our* legends, its languages to our languages, and its people to our people—if all at a distance deep in the fictional mists before recorded history. This is not to say that Tolkien thought that the Battle for Helm's Deep truly occurred somewhere in, say, Eastern Europe, but that something like Helm's Deep *could* have occurred there, and perhaps that something like it *ought* to have occurred there. Middle-earth, in other words, is the result of the application of philological principles (finding words behind words, stories behind stories) to mythology. Shippey has elsewhere termed the resulting mythology-behind-mythologies an "asterisk-reality," thus underscoring its philological basis since non-extant words whose existence is rooted out by linguistic laws are typically preceded by asterisks to

⁴ For his part, the always insightful Shippey is ambiguous in his postulations concerning the Undying Lands. On the one hand, he calls them both "lands of true immortality," and a "kind of Heaven" (*Road* 301, 240). Yet he also appears to associate them with an "Earthly Paradise" while simultaneously setting them "opposed to Eden" (240-41). Other critics have followed suit in their identifications; Amendt-Raduege, for example, terms them "the ultimate reality of Middle-earth" (53). As we will see, Tolkien's cosmographic geography is far more precise than this.

mark their "invention" as missing links in the evolutionary chain of language.⁵ By such logic, the "far green country" must have some connection to our present reality—it ought to be an asterisk-far-green-country to something else identifiable, not unlike at all the "asterisk-cosmogony" that John William Houghton finds at work in part of Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. But is it simply, as many critics have claimed, Heaven?

Within the basic definitions of Tolkien's mythology, Frodo's destination is known as the Undying Lands (or Aman). In the beginning of time these islands were made the home of the Valar, those demiurgic beings created before Creation in order to assist the One God (Ilúvatar) in fashioning the world and those things that would dwell within it. In time, it became, too, a domain for certain of the immortal Elven peoples who were allowed—because their agelessness made them forever foreigners in the otherwise mortal surrounds of Middle-earth—to cross over the great sea to the West and join with the immortal Valar in their lands. To recount in full the history of the Undying Lands and its association with the Elves is unnecessary here, but the point must be made that, at the end of the Second Age, Sauron convinced the prideful men of Númenor that if they were to take possession of the Undying Lands they would take possession of immortality. So, the Númenoreans attempted to take those lands by force. The result, not surprisingly, was devastation: the moment the first of the men of Númenor set foot upon the shore of the Undying Lands, "the Valar laid down their Guardianship [of Middle-earth] and called upon the One [God], and the world was changed. Númenor was thrown down and swallowed in the Sea, and the Undying Lands were removed for ever from the circles of the world" (*LotR* App.A.1013). Thus in the fall of Númenor we can recognize both the myth of Atlantis, as the greatest of man's civilizations sinks beneath the waves, and the story of Babel, as the creative powers scatter men in reaction to their sacrilegious attempt to physically reach the realm of the divine. We see, in other words, Tolkien's mythological philology at work.

Because they have been cut off as a result of men's actions, after the Second Age the Undying Lands become a place *between* Over-heaven and Middle-earth, a place accessed from the lower realm only by special appointment, we might say, for it was only by the leave and assistance of the Valar that one could make the crossing. Frodo's place on the journey at the end of the Third Age, for example, is due to both the gift of Arwen and his unique

⁵ Invented, that is, in the sense of discovery. Such words, more often than not, would undoubtedly have been real, only being missing due to the chances of history that have failed to preserve them. The similarity of the words for "man" in Old English (*guma*), Latin (*humus*), and Greek (*khamai*), for instance, implies an Indo-European word (**dhghem*) behind them all that, although unrecorded in history, must of necessity have existed. For more discussion of this process in relation to Tolkien, see Shippey's *Road*, 1-54.

position as a Ring-bearer, whose tasks have taken such a toll on his body, mind, and spirit that he is subject to the pity of the Valar and of Gandalf, who himself happens to be the last of the Istari, the Valar's emissaries on Middle-earth.

Much more could be said of the Undying Lands—many of the tales in *The Silmarillion*, for instance, involve events occurring on its shores—but although such details would be interesting, they would fail to tell us much more than we already know about Tolkien's "far green country": it is a nice place, and it seems that mostly immortals live there. But still the question remains of how we are to understand such a place in our own worldview, and whether or not the Undying Lands are in fact paradise for humanity. To put the matter in a different and admittedly simple-sounding way: where exactly did Frodo go and what was his ultimate fate there (or elsewhere)? In her recent study of Tolkien's works, Verlyn Flieger concludes that "there is no single final answer" to the question (165), but is that really the case?

Tolkien himself is somewhat elusive on this account, but his most direct explanations of Frodo's fate come in his letters. True, Tolkien does name Valinor "paradise," or, as he states in a letter to Milton Waldman in 1951, "a kind of Paradise, the home of the Gods" (*Letters* 148). In another letter dated 25 November 1954 Tolkien terms the home of the Valar "an *earthly* Elvish paradise" (his emphasis), and he goes on to comment on the fate of mortals in such a place: "this is strictly only a temporary reward: a healing and redress of suffering. They cannot abide [in Valinor] for ever, and though they cannot return to mortal earth, they can and will 'die'—of free will, and leave the world" (*Letters* 198-99). Similarly, in a draft of a letter written in September 1963 Tolkien writes that Frodo

was sent or was allowed to pass over Sea to heal him—if that could be done, *before he died* [his emphasis]. He would have eventually to 'pass away': no mortal could, or can, abide for ever on earth, or within Time. So he went both to a purgatory and to a reward, for a while: a period of reflection and peace and a gaining of a truer understanding of his position in littleness and in greatness, spent still in Time amid the natural beauty of 'Arda Unmarred,' the Earth unspoiled by evil. (*Letters* 328)

The name "Undying Lands" is a misnomer as far as mortals go, it seems, and the men of Númenor were misled indeed when they thought that to live there meant immortality. An "earthly Elvish paradise," a "kind of Paradise," a "purgatory" and a "reward," something apart from the "mortal earth" but still within "the world" and "Time," and a place where Frodo and such other mortals who have garnered the "temporary reward" of living there will choose to "die" of their own "free will." It seems that the "far green country" is a strange place indeed, and, furthermore, that it is not at all what we generally consider to be Paradise or

Heaven in any Christian sense (as might be expected from a Christian author who avows his work is fundamentally Catholic). But that is readily explained, by Tolkien himself, in yet another letter draft, this time to Michael Straight: "The passage over Sea is not Death. The 'mythology' is Elf-centered. According to it there was at first an actual Earthly Paradise, home and realm of the Valar, as a physical part of the earth" (*Letters* 237). Thus, Valinor is expressly *not* paradise in the sense of Heaven, or a human after-life.

We can begin to understand what Tolkien is up to here by examining one of his shorter, lesser-known writings, "Leaf by Niggle"—a work seemingly removed in its entirety from the Elf-centered mythology of Middle-earth. Composed in a creative burst around 1942, during a time when, in Tolkien's own words, "*The Lord of the Rings* was beginning to unroll itself" (*Reader* 31), this short tale of a man named Niggle is clearly an allegory of a man's life and death.⁶ Niggle is a painter who has become consumed by a single painting of a tree that he cannot seem to finish since each detail he adds necessitates more details, more background, more canvas: he is caught up "niggling" in the leaves of the thing. He has a neighbor, Parish, who is lame and for whom he does odd jobs even though he'd usually rather be painting. Niggle is one day summoned by a Driver, who takes him at once to a train where he's bundled into a compartment. Niggle doesn't know where he's going and more than once it is remarked that he is unprepared for the journey. He falls asleep as the train enters a dark tunnel, and he awakes in "a very large, dim railway station" (107). He feels ill, faints, and is sent to the so-called Workhouse Infirmary, where he is given a great deal of manual labor to do. He is also given much time alone in the dark to think about things, it is said. Niggle is very unhappy at first, but in time he comes to accept his lot. Along about then he is judged by a two-person panel of disembodied voices, who eventually pronounce that he can "go on to the next stage" (112). So Niggle gets on another train, and is this time dropped off in a beautiful countryside where he comes to find himself in front of the Tree (with a capital *T*) that he had been trying to paint.⁷ It is the fulfillment of his dreams. He comes to realize that he is inside of his own infinitely detailed picture, now miraculously finished. Far in the distance he can see Mountains (with a capital *M*), and he deems them not "to belong to the picture" that he had painted. He associates them with "a link to something else, a glimpse through the trees of something

⁶ In some of its details the story is, as well, a semi-autobiographical work; see Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 266-77.

⁷ Regarding the "far green country," it is interesting to observe that Niggle gets to the Tree by riding the old bicycle he had at home, which is waiting for him when he exits the train. He gets on and rides "over a marvelous turf. It was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other" (113).

different, a further stage: another picture" (114). After awhile, Niggle is joined by Parish, and together they plant gardens around the Tree and build a small house. "It is no use denying that at first they occasionally disagreed," we are told, "especially when they got tired. For at first they did sometimes get tired. They found that they had both been provided with tonics. Each bottle had the same label: *A few drops to be taken in water from the Spring, before resting*" (116). The tonics do them good, and they get along pleasantly. Parish is noticeably no longer lame. When eventually they find that there is little more that they can do on their little plot of countryside, they start to walk towards those distant Mountains. When they near them, they are met by a man who looks like a shepherd. The man offers to guide them. Niggle wants to go on; Parish declines the offer since he wishes to await his wife. So Niggle alone goes with the shepherd:

He was going to learn about sheep, and the high pasturages, and look at a wider sky, and walk ever further and further towards the Mountains, always uphill. Beyond that I cannot guess what became of him. Even little Niggle in his old home could glimpse the Mountains far away, and they got into the borders of his picture; but what they are really like, and what lies beyond them, only those can say who have climbed them. (118)

As has been noted, this is all allegory, and one which seems to be rather obvious at that, at least on a certain level. The consensus among critics is that the Driver is Death, who sets Niggle on a journey through the after-life; the little compartment in which he is bundled, very likely, is his coffin; the dark tunnel, his grave; the Workhouse is Purgatory; and those two voices the celestial tribunal.⁸ To this point there is little cause to disagree with the common interpretations of the allegory. But when the narrative reaches the countryside, with its magnificent Tree, there is ample reason to depart from the views of previous critics who have interpreted it as Paradise—achieved, as Shippey points out, only after Niggle has done his time in the purgatorial Workhouse (*Road 53*). Richard L. Purtill, for instance, calls it "an ideal state of morality or art, [...] an image of Heaven" (5), and Shippey directly labels it "Heaven," or part of "the heavenly country" (*Road 44, J.R.R. Tolkien 277*), but there is reason to suggest that the Tree is most assuredly *not* Paradise. As John A. Ellison and others have observed, it can be only another stage of purgation. Note that, beautiful though it is, Niggle and Parish work to improve the countryside about the Tree. And though it is work of a more pleasurable kind than that which Niggle did in the Workhouse, it is still labor and a part of their purgation process. So, too, he and Parish need their tonics, at least initially, to get them through the day because

⁸ Shippey (*J.R.R. Tolkien 276*) identifies them as Justice and Mercy, though one might also see them as the Old and New Laws, those external voices of authority that breach through into our world. Paul Nolan Hyde similarly identifies them as the Father and Son (29).

they are still being healed. Such things would have no place in Paradise. Even the disembodied voices refer to this countryside as only "the next stage" (112). While one might posit that Paradise is the next stage following Purgatory, it is more consistent with the text to recognize Niggle's painting come to life simply as the next stage in Niggle's healing and purgation process—the next step in Purgatory.

In one of his letters Tolkien himself calls "Leaf by Niggle" a "'purgatorial' story" (*Letters* 195), and so it is, all the way to the end. In other words, "Tolkien's little *Purgatorio*," as Deborah Webster Rogers and Ivor A. Rogers term it (57), is not an allegory about the complete journey of the human soul—life, death, Purgatory, and Paradise—but one about the journey leading up to Paradise: life, death, and the stages of Purgatory. In this framework, the gardening can be seen as the continued work of purgation; the tonics, perhaps, are prayers, or the effects of baptism made manifest; and the drops from the spring are the affections of Grace that work to heal the soul (here symbolized in the healing of Parish's leg). Niggle's final destination, the true Paradise of Heaven, lies beyond the mountains, pointedly "uphill" from the Tree. It will take much more work to get there, and Niggle will only make it with the help of his shepherd guide (whom we are surely meant to identify as Christ). And of the actual nature of that final Paradise Tolkien does not say; in fact we might propose that he dare not even guess.

It is this final point that is so essential to a fuller understanding of the "far green country" and Tolkien's views of the final destination of the human soul within his Middle-earth mythology (and perhaps in his own personal beliefs). To describe Heaven is impossible; to even try to do so may well be sacrilegious. A devout Catholic and well-read medievalist, Tolkien would under such circumstances be quick to think of Paul, who writes in 2 Corinthians 12:4 that what is heard in Heaven (much less seen) cannot be repeated.

In his background of medieval studies Tolkien would also find exemplars in the literary allegorical game that inevitably results from these positions. And none seems more conspicuous than the Middle English poem that fascinated Tolkien for much of his life both spiritually and professionally: *Pearl*. In this allegorical poem, a man is missing his "pearl," and he seeks it in an enclosure. Distraught on not finding it, he falls asleep on a mound of earth and commences to dream. In this dream, he finds himself in an astoundingly beautiful land of green forests. He finds a stream there of purest water, with crystals and gems for a bed. Much to his surprise, he finds that the other side of the river is even more remarkable in its beauty, so much so that he takes it to be Paradise. His thoughts, in Tolkien's own translation of the poem: "More and more, and yet still more, / I fain beyond the stream had scanned, / For fair as was this hither shore, / Far lovelier was the further land" (13.1-4). It is in witnessing to the potential glories beyond the water that our dreamer notices a girl upon the

opposite shore, who proves to be the pearl he has lost (now understood as his infant daughter, miraculously made mature and aware in this place). When the pearl tells him of the great glories of the New Jerusalem in which she will reside, he notes that he can see no such city or citadel nearby. But he begs to be guided there if it should indeed exist: "'O spotless maiden kind!' I cried / To that lovely flower, 'O lead me there, / To see where blissful you abide, / To that goodly place let me repair!'" (81.1-4). The pearl-maiden refuses his request, saying that God forbids it, for the dreamer has not "strength to fare" in the blessed streets "Unless clean you be without a spot" (81.11-12). He lacks, in other words, the purely clean soul that is a necessity for entrance into the New Jerusalem. So instead she sends him along the river to a place where he is allowed the privilege to catch just a glimpse of that city, which is beyond comparison and even comprehension in its marvelous glory. We are told that the dreamer is so rapt with wonder at seeing it that at once he feels the need neither to "rest nor toil" (91.7). But when he catches sight of his guide once again, who has joined a long procession of happy people clad in white making their way toward the gleaming city, he can no longer contain himself:

Delight there pierced my eye and ear,
In my mortal mind a madness reigned;
When I saw her beauty I would be near,
Though beyond the stream she was retained.
I thought that naught could interfere,
Could strike me back to halt constrained,
From plunge in stream would none me steer,
Though I died ere I swam o'er what remained.
But as wild in the water to start I strained,
On my intent did quaking seize;
From that aim recalled I was detained:
It was not as my Prince did please.

It pleased Him not that I leapt o'er
Those marvelous bounds by madness swayed.
Though headlong haste me heedless bore,
Yet swift arrest was on me made,
For right as I rushed then to the shore
That fury made my dream to fade. (97.1-98.6)

And so the dreamer awakes in a graveyard, upon the mound of his daughter's grave, the vision complete.

The ties between this medieval poem and Tolkien's works are many.⁹ But to confine ourselves to the topic at hand, we might observe that the heedless, futile attempt of man to reach the divine lands, and the fact of its removal the moment he sets foot upon that paradisiacal place, are striking in their parallel to Númenor's attempt to assault the Undying Lands. And the layers of *Pearl's* depictions of the after-life, each impossibly more beautiful than the last, also relate to "Leaf by Niggle" with its Tree that seems paradisiacal but is revealed as something far less, only a remarkable stage in a long and wonderful journey. So, too, does the dreamer of *Pearl* think the opposite bank of the river to be Paradise, only to realize (with the maiden's help) that there's an even more profound Paradise beyond, of which he can only garner a glimpse—like Niggle's distant Mountains, which Tolkien dares not describe, or Frodo's abortive dream-vision in the house of Tom Bombadil.

Another poem that was close to Tolkien's professional life is the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, his translation of which was published alongside his translation of *Pearl*. In this romance we are given another glimpse of a near paradisiacal world into which the titular character wanders. The description of the realm of the Fairy King—into which Sir Orfeo journeys in an effort to rescue his departed bride—is very akin to that of Paradise (though it is pointedly the fairy world and not actually Heaven):

No man may tell nor think in thought
how rich the works that there were wrought;
indeed it seemed he gazed with eyes
on the proud court of Paradise. (lines 373-76)

Note that the poet makes a pointed reference to the impossible task of describing even this fairy court, which only "seemed" like Paradise. The beauty and plenty of the Fairy King's realm clearly defies the imagination. Ad Putter, in an article on medieval otherworlds, notes "It is suspiciously like Heaven. [...] Heaven is the place beyond all superlatives. And since writers of romance strive to create superlative worlds they often come close to transporting us to 'the proud courts of paradise'" (239). It would seem that Tolkien, like the medieval poets he revered, transports his readers to paradisiacal worlds—worlds that he himself has labeled "a kind of Paradise."

⁹ See, for example, Amendt-Raduege's discussion of their connections in her discussion of dream visions (49-50). In *Road* (218-19), Shippey makes some use of *Pearl* to argue that Lórien "is a sort of 'earthly Paradise,'" an identification he makes explicit in *J.R.R. Tolkien* (205). This conflation, which is followed by Chance (209-10), is one that we will counter below.

There are numerous other medieval works that can and should be brought to bear here, such as the tales concerning the voyages of St. Brendan, discussed by Charles A. Huttar, Paul Kocher (156-58), and Norma Roche, but one that needs specifically to be mentioned is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante's role in Tolkien's conception of Middle-earth is rarely discussed, but at least in this subject he looms large indeed.¹⁰ The geography of Dante's cosmos is well-known to most readers, one suspects, only from its initial book: *Inferno*, with its deepening pit of Hell's circles, crammed full of the damned. What fewer readers are aware of is the geography presented in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Purgatory, as Dante describes it, is very much akin to Hell: a series of circles, each nested within the other. Only instead of going deeper into a pit, Purgatory rises higher into the heavens, like a wedding cake. And at its summit, at the pinnacle of Purgatory, is the Earthly Paradise, Eden. It is there that Dante is able to undergo final purgation, the final "unspotting" of his soul, in order to ready himself for the journey into the Celestial Paradise described in *Paradiso*. The geography of *that* Paradise is a series of spheres surrounding the Earth (and thus both Hell and Purgatory) through which Dante rises. Above all these spheres is what he calls the Tenth Heaven, the Empyrean, in which God Himself resides. Dante's descriptions of the rising heavens are increasingly vague, and of the last he can only describe it as a Celestial Rose of light and circles within circles of such beauty and wonder that words are helpless before them.

So there are two paradises, then: an Earthly Paradise and a Celestial Paradise. The former is theoretically describable, the latter is not. For Tolkien, both a medievalist and a Catholic, such a cosmography would be both familiar and, we might presume, bordering on factual. And against this background we could term Niggles's Tree not Heaven, but perhaps a type of the Earthly Paradise, a worldly foretaste of the Celestial Paradise that lies beyond (or above) the Mountains in the distance.¹¹ And so, too, the Undying Lands to which Frodo is taken. Tolkien had noted with emphasis in his letter of 1954 that they are "an *earthly* Elvish paradise," not a celestial one. By process of mythological philology we have already seen how Númenor relates to Atlantis and Babel, and now, by that same process, we can see that the Undying Lands (as well as Niggles's Parish) can be seen as an Eden, the Earthly Paradise cut off from mortal men until after

¹⁰ Dante does not merit a single entry, for example, in the index to *Tolkien the Medievalist*, a recent collection of sixteen essays edited by Chance. For an overview of the little scholarship mentioning Dante's influence on Tolkien, see Merlin DeTardo's entry on "Dante" in Drout's *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*.

¹¹ See Tolkien's letter to his son Christopher, dated 30 January 1945, in which he also seems to equate Paradise (Earthly, it seems) with Niggles's Tree (*Letters* 111), an identification followed and expanded upon by Sebastian Knowles (132-41).

they have died.¹² Shippey has written that Frodo, in being "taken away in the end to Elvenhome to be cured [...] loses any hope of revisiting Lothlórien, the Earthly Paradise" (*J.R.R. Tolkien* 205). Quite the contrary, as it turns out. If it was Paradise he sought, he made it after all.

Genesis 3:24 relates how, after the Fall, cherubim and a flaming sword guard the entrances to Eden, but subsequent writers were to expand the nature of the obstacles barring our re-entrance into Paradise in very interesting ways. In *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, for instance, one of the most widely read books in the Middle Ages—and one Tolkien no doubt knew very well—the Earthly Paradise happens to be among the many places that John Mandeville catalogues during his world-ranging journeys. In the Far East, at the edge of the known (or, as often is the case with Mandeville, the invented) world, Mandeville describes how there is an area of darkness where people can see neither by day nor night. If you were to somehow pass through this bewildering shadow, you would find Eden. But Mandeville, who is so anxious to describe all manner of odd places that he has supposedly been, from the court of the Great Khan to regions full of headless people to the fabled lands of Prester John, admits that he has not entered the Earthly Paradise: "Of Paradise ne can I not speak properly. For I was not there. It is far beyond. And that forthinketh me. And also I was not worthy." Of course, what other men have reported of Eden Mandeville is happy to relate:

Paradise terrestrial, as wise men say, is the highest place of earth, that is in all the world. And it is so high that it toucheth nigh to the circle of the moon, there as the moon maketh her turn; for she is so high that the flood of Noah ne might not come to her, that would have covered all the earth of the world all about and above and beneath, save Paradise only alone. (ch. 34)

There is also a wall encircling Paradise, Mandeville tells us, and its single gate, hearkening back to Genesis, is warded with fire to keep out all mortal men. At its center is a well, from which four great rivers arise. Mandeville briefly describes those rivers, and the lands they run through, and then he reiterates its inaccessibility. The mountains around it are too high to be crossed, the area of

¹² The fact that Frodo travels west, while medieval understandings of Eden placed it in the farthest east, is less a problem for this interpretation than it might seem at first glance. Tolkien himself notes that "in the imagination of this story we are now living on a physically round Earth" (*Letters* 197), and he would know well that on a globe—a world that has been "bent," as it is so often termed in his mythology—such directions are by definition relative at best: east can be west and west can be east depending on one's direction and distance of travel. In addition, Tolkien's own mythology makes careful note of how the world has been broken by cataclysms since its creation, which makes these directional relationships increasingly difficult to sustain in any meaningful way over time.

darkness to be passed through is too deep, and the rivers are far too wild for navigation, though many men have tried and been lost. "So," he concludes, "no mortal man may approach to that place, without special grace of God."

Much of Mandeville's description could just as well relate to Tolkien's Undying Lands. It is the highest place on Earth, just as in the home of the Valar can be found Taniquetil, the highest mountain in the world. Paradoxically, they are both at once part of this world and utterly apart from it. Mandeville's Earthly Paradise is guarded by shadow, just as once a veil of shadow was drawn by the Valar between the Undying Lands and Middle-earth before they were sundered completely. Attempts have been made to access both by water, only to end in destruction and despair. And no mortal can reach them, "without special grace of God"—in the case of the Undying Lands, Gandalf and the Elves are excluded from the former rule as immortals, and Frodo is allowed entrance via the latter. The phrase "special grace" in this context is, in fact, echoed by Tolkien in a letter written 17 July 1971, where he talks of the path that leads to the Undying Lands, which is a "straight road to the true West and not the bent road of the earth's surface. [...] The Elves who took this road and those few 'mortals' who by special grace went with them, had abandoned the 'History of the world' and could play no further part in it" (*Letters* 411).

Though Peter Jackson and other critics would have it otherwise, then, we must surely conclude that Tolkien's "far green country" is *not* Heaven. It is instead an asterisk-Eden: not the place of final return outside of the world, but a place of origin still somehow strangely caught up within it—a place that although it has perhaps lost its intended purpose is nevertheless still tantalizingly close to reachable if not for the obstacles God has placed in the way. As Tolkien writes in a letter to his son Christopher, dated 30 January 1945:

partly as a development of my own thought on my lines and work (technical and literary), partly in contact with C. S. L[ewis], and in various ways not least the firm guiding hand of Alma Mater Ecclesia, I do not now feel either ashamed or dubious on the Eden "myth." It has not, of course, historicity of the same kind as the N[ew] T[estament], which are virtually contemporary documents, while Genesis is separated by we do not know how many sad exiled generations from the Fall, but certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it [...]. (*Letters* 109-10)

Frodo goes to the "far green country" of Eden, then. But what of his fate there? In his letter of 1971 quoted earlier, Tolkien states that for mortals their time in the Undying Lands "was a 'purgatory'"—and we can note now how important are his quotations marks around the term—"but one of peace and healing and they would eventually pass away (*die* at their own desire and of free will) to destinations of which the Elves knew nothing" (*Letters* 411). The fact that

Tolkien considered the existence of a type of purgatory for Men in the actual creative undertaking itself—rather than simply in correspondence—is made manifest in the later *History of Middle-earth* volumes. In the crafting of the story of Túrin Turambar, specifically the tale of "Turambar and the Foalókë," we find the following reference:

Yet now the prayers of Úrin and Mavwin came even to Manwë, and the Gods had mercy on their unhappy fate, so that those twain Túrin and Nienóri entered into Fôs'Almir, the bath of flame, even as Urwendi and her maidens had done in ages past before the first rising of the Sun, and so were all their sorrows and stains washed away, and they dwelt as shining Valar among the blessed ones, and now the love of that brother and sister is very fair [...]. (*Lost Tales II* 41)

The references to the mysterious Fôs'Almir in Tolkien's notes are few and rather vague.¹³ It is associated with the Lamp of Vana, and is described as a bath of fire, but little else is written about this concept. Regardless of its complete nature and role in Valinor, however, it is clear that Fos'Almir is a purgatorial flame for Túrin and Nienóri, and that Tolkien therefore envisioned Valinor as playing something of a purgatorial role for humanity. This view of a purgatorial fire is consistent with early, and some contemporary, Catholic views of Purgatory. The apostle Paul writes about the measure of a man's life and his works, suggesting that the fate of a man's soul depends in part upon the quality of the man and his deeds. After his death, each man will undergo Judgment, something akin to a purifying trial by fire. In 1 Corinthians 3:15 he writes, "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." While the passage itself is certainly an ambiguous one, it was important in the development of Purgatory in the Middle Ages. The image of the cleansing fire—the fire of Purgatory in this case rather than the fire of Hell—found great currency as a metaphor in the post-medieval period. Even modern Catholic theology describes the expiatory fire of purification.¹⁴ So, in the development of the Middle-earth mythology we find that Tolkien at least considered Valinor as an actual Purgatory for Men, complete with the expiatory flames of Fôs'Almir.

In reading Tolkien's many writings, it becomes clear that Valinor is not the final destination for Men. Rather, as Gwenyth Hood writes, "Valinor resembles the Earthly Paradise as Dante portrays it, perched on top of Mount

¹³ In the explanatory notes to his father's work, Christopher Tolkien writes: "The purifying bath into which Túrin and Nienóri entered, called *Fôs'Almir* in the final text, was in the rejected text named *Fauri*; in the *Tale of the Sun and Moon* it has been described (I.187), but is there given other names: *Tanyasalpë*, *Faskala-númen*, and *Faskalan*."

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of concepts of Purgatory in the Middle Ages, see Le Goff, especially 43-44.

Purgatory, where human souls experience it briefly after they are cleansed of sin, only to abandon it quickly for the Heavenly Paradise" (140). This idea of a place of healing is not at all unknown to Tolkien, as he notes in an airgraph to his son Christopher in 1944: "I do not think so well of the concluding chapter of C.S. Lewis's new moral allegory or 'vision,' based on the mediæval fancy of the Refrigeria, by which the lost souls have an occasional holiday in Paradise" (*Letters* 71).¹⁵ While Tolkien did not, apparently, like the way in which Lewis depicted Refrigeria in *The Great Divorce*, frowning upon the fanciful notion that one might take a "holiday" in Paradise, that does not mean that he did not provide his own sort of Refrigeria concept for Frodo and Bilbo. It would not be unlike Tolkien to improve upon an idea that he felt someone had handled poorly, or not given due treatment (take, for instance, the Huorns coming to Helm's Deep as an improvement upon Birnam Wood marching on Dunsinane in *Macbeth*). However, even if Tolkien agreed with the idea that Valinor could be viewed as something like a Refrigeria concept, it is clear that he would separate such a holiday in an earthly paradise from the final destination of actual celestial Paradise. Again, the Undying Lands are only a quasi-paradise, another Eden, rather than Heaven.

With regard to Heaven, or a celestial Paradise in the mythology of Middle-earth, Tolkien wrote very little other than to point out that there was nothing to say because the truth was hidden. In *The Silmarillion* he notes that "the Eldar wondered much at the strange fate of Men, for in all their lore there was no account of it, and its end was hidden from them" (149). In the tale of Túrin Turambar as outlined in *Unfinished Tales*, he places the question in the mouth of a character. Túrin asks Sador about the fate of Lalaith, who has perished, and the answer he receives is not enlightening: "As to the fate of men . . . you must ask those that are wiser than Labadal. [...] [W]here she has gone no man knows" (61). Tolkien makes it clear time and again that the fate of Men after death is a mystery to men, the elves, and even the Valar: "But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. [...] The fate of Men after death, maybe, is not in the hands of the Valar, nor was all foretold in the Music of the Ainur" (*Silmarillion* 42, 105). This view of celestial Paradise, the fate of Men, is entirely consistent with Tolkien's personal theological views as a Catholic. The ultimate plan of salvation for mankind is a

¹⁵ *Refrigeria* is the concept that select souls might visit paradise between their deaths and the final Day of Judgment. There are several views regarding the exact nature and/or role of Refrigeria (which means essentially refreshment); some theologians depict it to be actual Paradise, while others view it as something more akin to a very pleasant state of mind.

mystery, and to argue certain knowledge of it might well be considered sacrilegious.

However, the notion that Frodo will *choose* to die is, regardless of all that Tolkien wrote of death being the "gift" given to men, startling.¹⁶ And despite the high rates of suicide among sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder—or "shell-shock," to use again the term that has been applied to Frodo's condition—we are not to conclude that Frodo will ultimately take his own life. Instead, we can understand his choice to die by turning again both to Tolkien's Christian and medieval forebears, for the Bible itself tells of two mortals, Enoch and Elijah, who were taken up by God without dying.¹⁷ Their destination, exegetes eventually determined, was Eden, to which they were transported via God's "special grace" (to return to Mandeville and Tolkien's phrase). And, like Eden itself, these two men were to be granted much additional exposition during the Middle Ages.

Enoch and Elijah were identified as the Two Witnesses of the Book of Revelation, two mysterious figures who appear at the Apocalypse to witness for Christ in the final battle against the Antichrist, as early as the time of Justin Martyr in the second century, and this identification became more deeply entrenched as the Middle Ages began—to the point that it was accepted essentially as dogma in, for instance, the ninth-century *Glossa Ordinaria*, the preferred commentary of Scripture until at least the seventeenth century. Building out of Revelation 11:3-13, it was said in these traditions that during the Apocalypse at the end of time Enoch and Elijah would return from Eden to Earth, where they would preach against the Antichrist and convert the Jews. The Antichrist would then kill these Two Witnesses, who three-and-a-half days later would be resurrected and taken into Heaven just prior to the Second Coming.

Tolkien seems to have often thought about the end times,¹⁸ and he would have had access to the Enoch and Elijah legends about the *Parousia* in many forms, from the Latin of the *Glossa* and of Adso's *Libellus de Antichristo*, to the Old English of a translation of Adso and several of Aelfric's sermons, to Cornish in the magnum opus of Cornwall, the *Ordinalia*, where it appears in the Resurrection Play. The legends appear much in Middle English, as well: in *Cursor Mundi* and *The Pricke of Conscience*, for example, and even in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, where Alexander the Great's conquests are said to reach to "Ercoles boundes— / Ther Ely and Ennoke ever hafe bene sythen, / And to the come of Antecriste unclosede be thay never" (lines 334-37). In his association with Frodo's choice to die, however, Tolkien more likely had in mind the Middle

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of this principle in Tolkien, see Greenwood.

¹⁷ For their "takings," see Genesis 5:22-24 (for Enoch) and 4 Kings [2 Kings] 2:1-11 (for Elijah). To some, Moses represents a third such individual, though he does not enter into the later discussions of the eschaton accounted below.

¹⁸ Note, for example, his quick turn to eschatology in *Letters* 110.

English Chester Mystery Plays, in which the Two Witnesses appear in the “Harrowing of Hell,” “Prophecies of Antichrist,” and “Antichrist” plays. In the last of these, for example, Enoch and Elijah gladly and knowingly offer themselves to the Antichrist’s sword, aware that it is only through the deaths that have been so long denied them that they can have full access to the resurrected life of purity in Heaven.¹⁹ Indeed, it is the Antichrist’s striking them down that immediately brings the archangel Michael to the stage, whereupon he slays the Antichrist. Enoch and Elijah then reappear, marveling in their glorified flesh. Michael tells them:

Enock and Helye, come you anon.
My lord wyll that you with mee gonne
to heaven-blysse, both blood and bone,
evermore there to bee.
You have binne longe, for you bynne wyse,
dwellinge in yearthly paradyce;
but to heaven, where himselfe ys,
nowe shall you goe with mee. (98.715-22)

Together the three of them then ascend to Heaven, as angels sing. Earthly Paradise, again differentiated from Heaven itself, is only a temporary way-station for Enoch and Elijah. The greatest gift that they can be given is to die as other mortals so that they, too, like other mortals, can be raised into the glory of eternity of the Second Coming and the New Jerusalem to follow.

The Earthly Paradise to which Frodo goes is a very different kind of Purgatory. It is a “between” land of waiting; not a place of actual purgation—unless purgation be defined so as to include healing and recovery—but a place that seems to exist, rather, side-by-side with Purgatory. Thus, in the mythological philology of Middle-earth, we can see how Frodo, standing beside the White Ship upon the distant shore of that “far green country,” becomes a figure like Enoch or Elijah, dwelling in Eden, awaiting there the end of all things when he, too, will choose to die and partake of God’s greatest gift to man:²⁰ the Last Judgment when Earth, Eden, and Purgatory will all be emptied and as forgotten as the Elves, replaced with the New Jerusalem of Heaven-on-Earth and the new immortalities that come with it. What form that Paradise will take, however, is a mystery—and Tolkien would have it no other way.

¹⁹ Their foreknowledge is made clear in the earlier *Chester* “Harrowing of Hell” play, where they greet a surprised Adam as he passes through Eden on his way to Heaven and Elijah notes that they themselves will be slain soon enough (18.237-52).

²⁰ And to hobbits, too, apparently, though one wonders if this association goes some way to underscoring the hobbits as a sub-race of humans—a topic for another time and place.

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