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The Arch and the Keystone

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

The growing body of writing both by and about Tolkien insures that not only can we no longer read the unknown book I discovered in 1956, we can't even all read the same book in 2019. We have too many opinions based on too much information from too many sources to come to a consensus. In spite of his fame, in spite of his position at the top of the heap, in spite of *The Lord of the Ring*'s established position as Waterstone's Book of the Century, the world has and probably will continue to have trouble agreeing on who/what he is.

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The Arch and the Keystone[1]

Verlyn Flieger

Since the theme of this conference is "Looking Back, Moving Forward," let's start there. Looking back, it was 65 years and five days ago on July 29, 1954 that *The Fellowship of the Ring* hit the bookstalls. I think it's safe to say that if it weren't for that event on that day I wouldn't be here this morning. And neither would you. Although the huge rush of fantasy and mythopoeia that typified the mid-20th century wasn't one hundred percent due to J.R.R. Tolkien, he certainly played a major part in it. He may have caught the crest of an incoming wave, but he rode it to shore. That same wave carried Glen GoodKnight to the creation of the Mythopoeic Society in 1967 and the first Mythcon Conference in 1969—whose 50th anniversary we are here to celebrate.

It's hard to remember nowadays that back in the fifties, when I first read *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was far from the iconic figure he is today. In fact he was pretty much unknown. When a co-worker lent me the book in the winter of 1956, I had never heard of him, and I venture to guess that ninety-nine people out of a hundred had never heard of him either. I therefore had in 1956 an experience impossible in 2019, not just for me but for anyone who hasn't been living in a cave for the last six and a half decades—the singular thrill of discovering *The Lord of the Rings* for and by myself. I came to it a blank slate, unburdened by other opinions, uninfluenced by hype, criticism, interpretation, or imitation. Like the man in Tolkien's allegory, I could climb unencumbered to the top of the tower and there look out upon the sea. For this I will always be grateful.

Those were the days.

Moving forward is more challenging. How can we contrive to move forward when, like Alice's Red Queen, we have to run faster and faster just to stay in place? The growing body of writing both by and about Tolkien ensures that not only can we no longer read the unknown book I discovered in 1956, we can't even all read the same book in 2019. We have too many opinions based on too much information from too many sources to come to a consensus. In spite of his fame, in spite of his position at the top of the heap, in spite of *The Lord of the Rings'* established position as Waterstone's Book of the Century, the world has and probably will continue to have trouble agreeing on who/what he is.

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[1] Scholar Guest of Honor Address, Mythcon 50, San Diego, California, 2019.

That's not for lack of trying. We have pasted labels on him, called him a medievalist, a modernist, a post-modernist, a royalist, a fascist, a misogynist, a feminist, a racist, an egalitarian, a realist, a romantic, an optimist, a pessimist. He's been variously characterized as homophobic and homo-social in both work and life. His fiction has been interpreted as Boethian, Manichean, Augustinian and Aquinian. He's been typed as a radical and a conservative, a Christian apologist and a pagan, a Catholic who believed in Fairyland, a monarchist who exalted little people, a Tory whose political views leaned toward anarchy (*Letters* #52, p. 63). The fact that all these labels can find a fit only adds to the confusion.

It is in that confused situation that we now find ourselves, confronting ever more narrow and discrete paths of investigation, all of which lead—where? What exactly is the goal? Is it the tremendous body of work? Is it the man himself? And how do you—or even can you—tell the difference? With the enormous proliferation of fantasy, sword and sorcery, science fiction, urban fantasy, topias of all sorts from u- to dys- to eco-, what is it that sets Tolkien apart from the others? We've all read the books. We've all seen the photographs, the scholarly professor at his desk with his pipe, the venerable grandfather figure posed next to an equally venerable tree. He towers over modern fantasy like one of the Pillars of the Kings at the Argonath. But who exactly is this guy? What is it that makes him still after sixty-five years and a lot of competition the premier author (not just fantasist) of the 20th century? Who is J.R.R. Tolkien?

I used the word *iconic* a couple of paragraphs ago, and I don't think anyone here would disagree with me. But *icon* just means "image" and that is part of my problem. Much Tolkien scholarship is devoted to creating the image by finding the man in the work, by exploring the fiction for clues to his thinking, his beliefs, his opinions on everything from sexuality to the green movement to social order to industrialization. By, in short, constructing an image out of what can be found in his writings. But therein lie pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. There are so many and various things to be found in his writings that we make the inevitable mistake of confusing the image with the man.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) all that has been written about him, in spite of (or perhaps because of) all that he himself has written, the essential J.R.R. Tolkien still eludes us. What he really thinks, what he really believes, is still and undoubtedly will continue to be a matter of conjecture and (of course) of lively debate. That is partly, of course, because his work is so various, but also because when we look at Tolkien we are likely to see ourselves, and thus to find in his work what we want to see. This is as true of his most devoted fan as of his nastiest critic. It is as true of me as it is of Edmund Wilson or Germaine Greer. Or, I dare say, of Peter Jackson. But the result is that the more I read about Tolkien the less homogenous a figure I find. What I find instead is increasing

fragmentation and polarization. Everybody has their own private Tolkien—more Tolkiens than you can shake a stick at.

I have to admit that Tolkien himself makes it easy, because so much of the primary evidence—that is to say, his writing—seems to toggle between diametrically opposite positions. He's been accused of writing about "good and evil" or "black and white," and maybe that's where the trouble starts, because his good guys do bad things and his bad guys do good things and black and white get blended into grey and their inventor has to answer for all. The man who betrayed Frodo at the Cracks of Doom also arranged to make it Gollum who actually saved Middle-earth. The author who brought Frodo home to the Shire is the same one who made it impossible for him to live there. The writer who sent Frodo in sight of the "far green country" pivoted a hundred and eighty degrees to write "The New Shadow," a futuristic sequel about the Fourth Age so "sinister and depressing" and bleak in its outlook that he couldn't bring himself to finish it ("The New Shadow" 410).

The immediate response by the reader to such contradictory positions is bewilderment. The subsequent response is the impulse to reconcile the contradictions. Which of course cannot be done, because if they could be reconciled, they wouldn't be contradictory. In what follows I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know. Instead, I'm going to cover old ground in the hope that it will at least get us up to the starting gate. What I intend to do this morning is to explore some examples of contradictions and see if we can find a way to allow them to live together, to be in opposition yet representative of their creator. If it works, this will—fingers crossed—allow us to see Tolkien as less "either-or" than "both and," as the center between two points that defines them by keeping them apart.

Like a good politician, I'm going to give you old news as new revelation and try to persuade you to rediscover it.

"*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" and "On Fairy-stories"

Let's look first at two outstanding examples of his academic work, the two great lecture-essays, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," given in 1936, and "On Fairy-stories," given in 1939. I am going to assume that everybody here has some acquaintance with these two essays, so I won't go over them in detail or give their histories except to say that they are both of them dense, erudite, and scholarly. They were written by Tolkien the professor, not Tolkien the master-fantasist, and I only want to make one point, that their contrasting subject matters and Tolkien's treatment of each stand as philosophical bookends to his fiction. Opposition—in fact contradiction—between two important works by the same scholar is perplexing, as we expect writers to be reasonably consistent in thought and work. Yet opposing viewpoints are what I find here. The *Beowulf*

essay extols a worldview that faces death with courage and accepts it as finality, the end. The fairy-story essay exalts the Escape from Death that brings the Happy Ending. Simple juxtaposition of the two shows the contrast between them, a contrast not just in subject but in Tolkien's attraction to each. Rather than trying to close the gap and reconcile the two I'll let each speak for itself, starting with the *Beowulf*.

Beowulf, writes Tolkien, is a poem written by a Christian looking back at a heathen time, and it is the death-embracing worldview of that heathen time that his essay explores and praises. In particular he defends two of the poem's central characters, the humanoid man-eating monster Grendel and the fire-breathing dragon, finding them not the irrelevancies they were judged in his day but central embodiments of some of the darkest elements of human existence. The first monster, Grendel, epitomizes greed, possessiveness, bloodthirstiness, wholesale destruction, mayhem and murder. The second monster, the dragon, is death, the lurking, prowling, pouncing monster we all live with.

The poem is not lacking in human monsters as well, who plunder and betray and burn and kill. That they parallel but do not outshine the actual monsters is one of the *Beowulf* poet's most brilliant strategies. The gods may "go or come," Tolkien asserted, but the monsters do not depart, and "within Time the monsters would win" ("*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" [BMC] 22). Tolkien's closing phrase is, "until the dragon comes," as he does for everyone sooner or later. It is a heroic vision but also a hopeless one.

One of the most memorable lines is a sentence in Anglo-Saxon: "*lif is læne: eal scæceð leoht and lif somod*," (life is [a] loan; all perishes, light and life together) (BMC 19). So powerful is this statement that first-time readers of the essay not infrequently mistake it for a line from the poem itself. It is not. In his note on "A Spliced Old English Quotation," Mike Drout has shown that this particular sentence does not occur in this form anywhere in Anglo-Saxon literature. It is Tolkien's own invention, made by combining two related ideas that do appear in some form or other in early English poetry. The first idea, *lif is læne,* is a commonplace that pops up in various forms in such poems as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* and *Beowulf*. The second comes from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith*, "*oþþæt eal scæceð leoht and lif somod*," (until all departs, light and life together). Both are typical of what Tolkien called the Northern theory of courage (BMC 20), but it was Tolkien who put them together.

Combined, these two sentences are greater than the sum of their parts. They proclaim the message that Tolkien found in *Beowulf* and restated a few pages later as "man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die." He called it a "theme no Christian need despise" (BMC 23). Clearly, the Christian Tolkien did not despise it. Instead he espoused it. What Tolkien says about

Beowulf can with equal truth be said about Tolkien. Though his essay reiterates that *Beowulf* is the work of a Christian looking back at a pagan time, his interest and his focus are nevertheless on the pagan, "Northern" ethic that death is the end of life.

I think it worth noting that it is also in the *Beowulf* essay that on two separate occasions Tolkien laments the lack of information about pre-Christian English mythology. "Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing" (BMC 21), and a few pages later and even more strongly, "[W]e may regret that we do not know more about English pre-Christian mythology" (24). Given Tolkien's later description to Milton Waldman of his ambition to write a mythology "for England," I suggest we should read these two statements in that context and thereby see his regret as a motive to action rather than a static state of mourning.

Turning now to "On Fairy-stories" we find there not just a contrast to the *Beowulf* essay, but its opposite pole in both content and strategy. "On Fairy-stories" is equally learned but less focused, more wide-ranging, not an analysis and defense of one poem but the re-valuation of a time-honored (and to Tolkien, a much-misunderstood) genre. Less an argument than an investigation, the essay winds from the power of language to enchantment to fantasy to the sub-creation of another world. Tolkien covers a lot of ground, but today I want to focus on one particular element which he finds in fairy-stories and which offers a direct contrast to the *Beowulf* essay. That is *escape*, especially and most importantly Escape from Death. This comes about, says Tolkien, through the one element central to the fairy-story genre, the *eucatastrophe*. A word of his own coinage combining Greek *eu*, "good" and *catastrophe,* "downturn," it describes the last-minute escape that turns the story from sorrow to joy, the turn that brings Snow White back from death or awakens the Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. That brings the Happy Ending. It is the combination of *eucatastrophe* and Happy Ending that characterizes the fairy-story. A pretty big contrast to the *Beowulf*ian acceptance of death as the end.

But Tolkien does not stop there. He goes on to propose a thematic link with Christianity that further divides the two essays. The Gospels, Tolkien says, "contain a fairy-story" ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 155) except that this one is true. Instead of the *Beowulf*ian tragedy of human life "within Time," fairy-stories, says Tolkien, "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through […] we stand […] outside Time itself, maybe" (OFS 129). And in that context the whole of the essay is preamble to its "Epilogue." Here he proposes the birth of Christ as the *eucatastrophe* of Man's history and the Resurrection as the *eucatastrophe* of the Incarnation. Redemption is the Happy Ending.

What's noteworthy here is that the same man wrote both essays and espoused both positions. I believe this contradiction comes less from without,

from the subject matter of the two essays, than from within, from the author's own inclinations, his personal gravitation toward what to speak and write about. I will return to this later, but for now I want to explore further the dichotomy I find in Tolkien's work and thought that I think makes him what he is.

MURRAY VS. RESNICK

Turning now from what Tolkien wrote for publication to what he said on more informal and spontaneous occasions, I want to look at statements to individual people. It is of course not unusual to find contradictions among someone's letters and interviews. We all say different things to different people in different circumstances at different times, and a lot depends on what they say or have said to us. I am going to cite two examples of contradiction in Tolkien's non-fiction, his letters and interviews, and relate them to the disparity I find between the two essays.

In 1953 Tolkien wrote to Fr. Robert Murray SJ, an old friend who had read a proof copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, that it was "fundamentally religious and Catholic" (*Letters* #142, p.172). Yet in 1966 he gave a quite different response to the interviewer Henry Resnick's question about the meaning of the Company's Dec. 25 departure from Rivendell, and the identification by some of Frodo with Christ. Tolkien's answer was, "you don't have to be Christian to believe that somebody has to die to save something," and furthermore that [*The Lord of the Rings*] "was not a christian [sic] myth anyhow" (Resnick 42-43). What are we to make of such a blatant contradiction by one statement of another on the same subject?

There is, of course, a distinction to be made between *Catholic* as a religion and *Christian myth* as a type of story. *Catholic* refers to a particular system of belief, a specific doctrine; *Christian myth* describes a genre, a type of story which expresses and illustrates that belief. Tolkien's statement to Resnick rejects the notion that *The Lord of the Rings* is a specifically Christian myth. He may have been thinking of C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, which are intentionally Christian and which Tolkien was on record as disliking for their bad sub-creation, and his rejection of Christian myth as a template for his *Lord of the Rings* could easily be read in that context.

In a more general sense, however, it seems inarguable that *fundamentally Catholic* and *not a Christian myth* are incompatible terms when applied to the same story by the same man. If *The Lord of the Rings* is Catholic then it is Christian. If it is not Christian then it is not Catholic. That each statement negates the other is obvious but not my point, which is rather that Tolkien was comfortable saying each at a different times to a different person. Either he is a hypocrite, which I do not believe, or he is more comfortable with

paradox than some of his readers, who would rather find him on one side or the other.

To be fair, Tolkien's later (1965) explanation in a letter to W.H. Auden was that he "intended [*The Lord of the Rings*] to be consonant with Christian thought and belief" (*Letters* #269, p.355). Nevertheless, "consonant with" is a long way from "fundamentally," and the difference is noteworthy.

In a more general sense, we can find evidence of the same dual perspective, the same apparent contradiction, in some his shorter fiction.

NIGGLE VERSUS SMITH

Here I want to pair two of Tolkien's short stories, the two best as well as the two best examples of my thesis. These are "Leaf by Niggle," the most clearly allegorical of his shorter works, and "Smith of Wootton Major," the purest example of what he meant by fairy-story. As with the essays, I'm going to assume that this audience is acquainted with both. "Niggle" was written in 1938-39, just a few years after his *Beowulf* lecture, at about the same period in which Tolkien gave the lecture that turned into "On Fairy-stories." "Smith" was begun in 1964 and published in 1967. Tolkien was in his late seventies, retired from academia, and had written in 1965, "I find it difficult to work—beginning to feel old and the fire dying down" (Carpenter 236). His great work was behind him. "Smith" was the last story he wrote and the last of his work to be published in his lifetime.

I want to make a case that these two stories move in opposite directions and take their protagonists—Niggle and Smith—to two quite different ends. One man, Niggle, goes from troubled human life through what is unmistakably purgatory and thence to a series of higher and more fulfilling visions that invite interpretation as heavenly. The other man, Smith, is expelled unwillingly from the enchanted otherworld of Faërie to go back to ordinary human life. Tolkien is the arbiter of fate for both these protagonists.

"Leaf by Niggle" is easy to read as allegory, and indeed lends itself to that approach more easily than almost anything else Tolkien has written. It is the story of a man, Niggle, who, knowing he must go on a journey, is preoccupied in the meantime by his efforts to paint the essence of a tree or even a leaf, and is hampered by his day-to-day obligations. We have all felt Niggle's frustration when the ordinary—all the things we have to do—gets in the way of the extra-ordinary—the thing we really want to do. The story is a moving and lyrical exploration of the struggle of human life, presenting Niggle as a Tolkienian Everyman striving to create while constantly being deflected by the chores and demands of the everyday world around him. As a short story it is near perfect in its brevity, compression, and compassion. As an allegory it invites sympathetic comprehension. Niggle goes by stages from earthly life to

an afterlife where his art is fulfilled and extended, and the story by implication (allegory, by its nature, has a message beyond its subject matter) holds out that vision to its readers.

"Smith of Wootton Major," though it can be (and has been) read as allegory, is in tone and treatment a fairy-story, a genre which, while open to interpretation, is not agenda-driven as is allegory. Its protagonist Smith, whom many readers also identify as a Tolkien figure, is given access to Faëry, but in contrast to Niggle's final progress toward the Mountains and his laughter with Parish that ends the story, Smith is told he has to give up the star that grants him entry and "come back to hammer and tongs"—that is to say, to surrender his passport at the end of his holiday and get back to work. It is worth noting that while Niggle is an artist, Smith is an artisan, a blacksmith who works with iron, traditionally an element inimical to fayery. That Tolkien should have chosen this medium for his central character I find quirky and perplexing. But then, nobody ever said Tolkien was an easy read. (I certainly never did.)

"Smith" was written in response to George MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, whose vision of fairyland Tolkien found too sugary for his taste. It is probably Tolkien's best and most honest portrayal of his idea of Faery, a world of enchantment that yet is remote, even severe, standoffish with strangers. In Faery Smith enters a world he does not fully understand, and is witness to events—some beautiful, some daunting—that go beyond his experience and his comprehension. He sees warriors marching on their way to an unknown destination to fight a battle whose outcome he will never know. He sees maidens dancing, and one invites him to dance with her but he doesn't know till afterward that she is the Queen of Faery. He is guarded from the "Greater Evils," and the "Lesser Evils" avoid his star so that he is "as safe as a mortal can be" (*Smith* 24). But that there are evils is not in doubt.

I want to make clear that I am not equating Niggle's Heaven with Smith's Faërie or promoting Faërie as a kind of Heaven. I am simply contrasting them as two different otherworlds to which in Tolkien's fiction and his imagination the human traveler—or the human experience—has access. What I do want to point out is that the two protagonists Niggle and Smith are projections, as well as competing aspects of Tolkien. He himself made no bones about the autobiographical element in "Leaf by Niggle," attributing its inspiration to the tree outside his bedroom window, referring to *The Lord of the Rings* as his "own internal Tree" (*Letters* #241, p.321), and describing the story as "part apologia, part confession" (#98, p.113). In Priscilla Tolkien's article on "Leaf by Niggle" written for the Tolkien Estate website she cites her father's endless professional academic duties which left him little time for creative work, so we are in good company with both Tolkien and his daughter in reading Niggle as Tolkien and Tolkien as Niggle.

It is equally possible to read the character of Smith as Tolkien and Tolkien as Smith. As with "Leaf by Niggle" and its image of the tree, Tolkien made no bones about what his biographer Humphrey Carpenter described as his "farewell to faery"; Tolkien himself calling it "an old man's story, filled with the presage of bereavement […] written with deep emotion, partly drawn from the experience of […] advancing age" (qtd. in Carpenter 243). Carpenter wrote of Tolkien that "[l]ike Smith […] [he] had, in his imagination, wandered for a long while through mysterious lands; but now he felt the approach of the end, and knew that he would soon have to surrender his own star, his imagination" (243).

The contrast between the two stories is not the epic contention I've described between *Beowulf* and fairy-stories, nor is it the flat-out contradiction between what Tolkien wrote to Murray and what he said to Resnick. But it is a change of dynamic, an altering of perspective that produces a draconian difference in outcome for Tolkien's two heroes. One knows what he really wants, and gets it. The other knows what he really wants, and is forced (I don't think that's too strong a word) to give it up.

The Lord of the Rings

So far I have offered examples from scholarly or personal or minor works, but I would be fudging if I didn't also apply my approach to *The Lord of the Rings* itself. As it set out upon its adventure in the 20th century the fairy godmothers at its birth christened it fantasy, and it has since been called a myth, a fairy tale, a great book, and juvenile trash. I have not been so diligent in my special walk as duly to read all that has been printed on this work. But I have read enough to venture the opinion that Tolkien studies, while rich in many departments, is surprisingly poor in one. It is poor in understanding of it as tragedy, as a story that, not unlike *Beowulf*, is concerned above all with fall and failure, with the ultimate victory of the monsters.

It would not be Tolkien's first such story. Both his Kullervo and his Túrin Turambar are tragic heroes who fail, both more relentlessly if less precipitously, than Frodo. Nevertheless, what Tolkien does to Frodo is worse than what he does to Kullervo or Túrin, or what the poet did to Beowulf, for while these heroes' lives end in death—two of them by suicide—Tolkien forces Frodo to live with the knowledge of his moral failure at a job he never wanted to do in the first place. The tragic hero's failure brings about the fairy-story hero's Happy Ending. Frodo and Sam, at the Cracks of Doom and in the aftermath, embody between them the final tension and opposition that characterizes Tolkien's masterwork.

As he is for Niggle and Smith, Tolkien is the arbiter of fate for the two heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, and their contrasting fates are not unlike those of

Niggle and Smith, though the harshest is reserved for Frodo. Sam gets the *eucatastrophe*: the destruction of the Ring, the restoration of his beloved master to sanity, the return to the Shire and the Happy Ending. It is Tolkien's supremest irony that Frodo gets these selfsame things and cannot keep them. Destruction of the Ring, which saves the world, is to Frodo irreparable loss. He is rescued from madness only to awake to the bitter knowledge of his moral weakness and his downfall. His return to the Shire is equally bitter, for not it but he has changed. Sam heals the Shire, but he cannot heal Frodo. Instead of Sam's Happy Ending, Frodo gets the tragic hero's *peripeteia*, reversal of fortune. Instead of coming home to Rosie he has to leave Bag End and the Shire and Middle-earth for an unknown future.

I know what you're going to tell me. The Grey Havens, the ship, the Straight Road, and of course the far green country. My point is—we never get there. Tolkien doesn't take Frodo that far, so he doesn't take the reader either. He shows it to Frodo and therefore to the reader from a distance, in contrast to the immediate power of Frodo's heartbreaking farewell speech to Sam about the inevitability of loss. Moreover, in his letters Tolkien makes it clear that though he sends Frodo to Valinor, to be healed "if that could be done, *before he died*" (*Letters* #246, p.328, italics in original) that healing is by no means a foregone conclusion, whereas death is. *Lif is læne.* Here are some of the things he wrote to inquiring and concerned readers who wrote to him about Frodo.

"The Quest […] was bound to fail" (*Letters* #181, p.234). "Frodo indeed 'failed' as a hero […] he gave in, ratted" (#246, p.326). "He saw himself and all that he done [sic] as a broken failure" (#246, p.328). And here's the kicker. "The power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures" (#191, p.252, italics in original). That seems pretty unequivocal. Also pretty pessimistic. Also pretty *Beowulf*ian. Just as he saw Beowulf's contention with the monsters as ultimate inevitable defeat, Tolkien has stacked the cards against his hobbit hero to make it "*quite impossible*" that Frodo could resist the Ring (*Letters* #191, p.251, italics in original). Like Beowulf, Frodo cannot win. His Quest cannot succeed. And then in the twinkling of an eye through Gollum's treachery it does succeed, and the reader is thrown out of epic tragedy back into fairy-story to experience the most stunning *eucatastrophe* in modern literature.

The Murray Letter

Such conflicting testimony, all of it straight from the horse's mouth, re-invokes but does not answer my original question: who is J.R.R. Tolkien? I said earlier that Tolkien carried contradiction within himself, and in this context I'd like to return to Father Robert Murray, the man who whom Tolkien wrote the "fundamentally religious and Catholic" statement about his work. Murray was a longtime friend, having become a Catholic through his close friendship with

the Tolkien family, and knew Tolkien firsthand in a way not accessible to scholars and critics today, however much they may study his work. That being the case, his comments are worth taking seriously.

In 1980 Murray wrote a letter to a graduate student whose dissertation on Tolkien he had been asked to read. If you're interested, you can read the whole letter in October, when it will be published in a Note by Richard West in the forthcoming *Tolkien Studies* (vol. 16). In the meantime, here is part of what Murray wrote in response to the student's reading of the "fundamentally religious and Catholic" statement I just referred to. Regarding this statement, Murray wrote, "Tolkien was a very complex and depressed man and my own opinion of his imaginative creation [*The Lord of the Rings*] is that it projects his very depressed view of the universe at least as much as it reflects his Catholic faith" (Murray qtd. in West).

I have to agree with Murray, especially in light of the fact that the statement in question was written to Murray himself, who, it seems safe to say, knew the writer of it better than I do. I too find in *The Lord of the Rings* a powerful pull toward the dark that is equal to his desire for light and is even more narratively effective. That pull goes a long way toward accounting for the dichotomies and contradictions I have also found elsewhere. It throws light on not just the two great essays with their competing worldviews but also the diametrically opposing trajectories of the two short stories, "Leaf by Niggle" and "Smith of Wootton Major." It deepens and enriches the complexities of *The Lord of the Rings*. It's what gives Tolkien's work its curious power to capture and hold not just the imagination but the spirit. In fact Murray's summation can stand for the whole arc of Tolkien's work from the very early "The Story of Kullervo" and "The Fall of Gondolin" through a lifetime spent on the Silmarillion and *The Lord of the Rings* to that book's abandoned sequel "The New Shadow."

In the same letter Murray wrote further that, "There *is* a case to be made about Tolkien the Catholic, but I simply could not support an interpretation which made this the key to everything" (Murray qtd. in West). Perhaps the problem lies in the student's implied assumption that there *is* a key. I would like to offer in place of a key that will unlock everything a key*stone* that will hold everything together, a central element that will sustain and bridge in opposition two sides that do not meet. Back at the beginning of my talk I asked, "who is J.R.R. Tolkien?" Now I will offer an answer to my own question, not with a *who* but with a *what*. Tolkien is the keystone in the great arch of his work, the element that divides and at the same time bridges the divide.

He is the center held in place by the two sides of his own nature. That nature hopes for the Happy Ending but expects the dragon. It can see his work as Catholic yet describe it as not Christian. It can walk toward Heaven with

Niggle's joy and walk away from Faery with Smith's regret. That nature can with ruthless compassion engineer the separate destinies of both Frodo and Sam. These oppositions are the sources of Tolkien's power and the tension between them is the energy that unites it. They are what after sixty-five years still sets him apart from the others and makes him the icon, the image, the towering figure that he is.

I want to emphasize that it is not two-sidedness *per se* that distinguishes Tolkien. Lots of fantasy authors—Stephen Donaldson, Neil Gaiman, Ursula Le Guin, H.P. Lovecraft, Mervyn Peake, to name just a few—have used their fantasy to explore good and evil, light and dark, the power of the dark side. But Tolkien wasn't using his fantasy so much as his fantasy was using him.

Here's how.

What holds a keystone in place is not cement but friction, the grinding of the two sides against each other that only the middle prevents from destruction. It is the pressure of competing forces not against each other but against what keeps them separate—the keystone that holds the arch. It is these same forces that generate the curious power of Tolkien's work. And it is these same forces creating this same friction that invite the disagreeing and debating Tolkien scholars and critics to find in Tolkien's work what they are looking for. I am not saying they're wrong. I'm saying they're right. What they see is there, even when they're seeing contradictory things. So instead of wrestling with Tolkien's contradictions, instead of trying to reconcile them or harmonize them, I propose that we take them *as* they are for *what* they are, two opposing and conflicting sides of one person whose contention makes him *who* he is as well as *what* he is, the keystone that creates the arch. Without it there's just a pile of bricks.

Thank you for listening. And Happy Anniversary.

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