Tolkien and the Relation between Sub-Creation and Reality (2023), edited by Guiseppe Pezzini and Eden O'Brien

John Wm. Houghton
The Hill School, emeritus, numenor001@gmail.com

Tolkien and the Relations between Sub-Creation and Reality, edited by Guiseppe Pezzini and Eden O'Brien. Edinburgh: Inklings Studies Supplements No. 3, 2023. x, 177 pp. £17.98 (trade paperback) ISSN 2057-6099. Published by the *Journal of Inklings Studies*. Order at: https://inklings-studies.org/buy/sub-creation-and-reality/

The eight essays in this collection (published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Tolkien's death) mostly originated among nineteen given in the Tree of Tales Conference at Rimini in August, 2021. After author biographies and an introduction by Pezzini, the book is arranged into three sections: three essays with "a comparative approach" (1), two "theoretical essays" (2), and three chapters on "the relationship between the primary and secondary worlds from within Tolkien's legendarium" (2).

Hamish Williams' thoughtful essay (written *de novo* for this volume) begins, after a useful survey of the literature, with a clarification of its place as neither source-study nor history of ideas, but reception scholarship:

> On a methodological level, this reception study is aimed at a broader, looser level of narrative motifs and of values represented in the text and does not entail specific one-to-one correspondences [. . .]
>
> As Kenneth Reckford has suggested, Tolkien and Virgil as human beings simply seem to have similar ways of thinking about things, in particular those relating to the natural world [. . .] as well as the evocation of ideals (the symbolism) which this natural realm triggers. (8-10, citing Kenneth J. Reckford, 'Some Trees in Virgil and Tolkien,' in G. Karl Galinsky (ed.), *Perspectives of Roman Poetry: A Classical Symposium* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974], 57–58.)

Williams focuses initially on two key elements of Virgilian pastoral, *otium* (leisure, compare *neg-otium*, work as the opposite of *otium*) and *amicitia* (friendship): "Hobbits," Williams notes, "are practitioners of *otium* par excellence" (12)—even the most famous notice in Shire history centers on the oxymoron, "Party Business." But the life of Virgil's shepherds is threatened by conversion of their countryside into farms for veterans, as The Shire faces greater enemies: and the Golden Age of Augustus that rescues the shepherds finds an easy parallel in the reign of Elessar Envinyatar, the Renewer. Finally, Williams argues that the mix of genres (pastoral, horror/Gothic, epic, elegiac) in which Tolkien's hobbits find themselves requires different virtues of them (which could be true even at home in the Shire: as the *otium* of the farmers in Virgil's *Georgics*

differs from that of the shepherds of the *Eclogues*, so are the virtues of Farmers Cotton and Maggot different from those of Bag End). All of which "suggest[s] that hybrid genres and hybrid virtues are necessary for character progression and survival" (29).

I had two quibbles with this generally excellent essay. First, Williams credits Tolkien with a pun in reference to Sam's "eavesdropping" on Frodo and Gandalf (13)—but if I understand Williams correctly, it is not a pun so much as taking etymology of the word literally. Later, commenting on his observation that Frodo "suffers a kind of death" (24-5), he writes "though, if we follow a literal reading of Tolkien's legendarium, we know that the hobbit travels from the Grey Havens to the Undying Lands": but his original point is valid, as Frodo (and Bilbo and Sam) stay in Valinor only temporarily and do, eventually, die.

In the second comparative essay, "Leaving the Shire: Evocations of the Late-Victorian and Edwardian Spirit of the Country in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" (31-53), Martin Simonson does a magisterial job.

The first substantive section of the chapter sketches late 19th and early 20th century attitudes toward nature, clearly differentiating them not only from their Romantic antecedents but also from once-conventional pictures of an Edwardian world of garden parties, fox hunting and Bloomsbury (35). In fact, since the 1960s, scholars have emphasized that Edwardian attitudes toward nature tended to echo Romantic ones in opposing urban sickness to rural health, "prompt[ing] a nostalgia for the countryside and an aesthetic appreciation of nature" even for *nouveaux riches* whose wealth came from the industrial world (37). Literature, the Arts and Craft movement, and even a fad for hiking amplified such ideas. Alhough Tolkien omits the industrial pole of this opposition until "The Scouring of the Shire," the hobbit "upper middle-class" live like country gentlemen from the beginning (41).

The following section shows how even childrens' literature problematizes the countryside

> insofar as it involves coming to terms with manifestations of deeper cultural strata (e.g. the mythical, legendary, and historical roots of England) that have become foreign to the modern Englishman (or, in Tolkien's case, hobbit), exposing them to the type of awe the Romantics associated with the sublime and causing not only apprehension but even horror. (42)

The Wind in the Willows (particularly "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn") and *Puck of Pook's Hill* illustrate this view of nature. The hobbits' childlike encounters, as they are leaving the Shire, with the Black Riders, elves, Old Man Willow, and

Tom Bombadil leave them "enriched by their intimacies with the deeper historical and mythical dimensions of their native lands" (46) in ways that echo Grahame and Kipling.

In section 4, Simonson juxtaposes Tolkien's depiction of the Withywindle and the Old Forest with Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907), a text with which Simonson believes Tolkien to have been "familiar" (49). Simonson cites Verlyn Flieger's comments ('Faerie: Tolkien's Perilous Realm,' 40, in Catherine McIlwaine's *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth*) on the subjective and superstitious nature of the hobbits' experience of the trees, but argues that

> this perception is affected by an imaginative vision – enhanced in turn by legends and history – and by the natural environment itself. In this way, nature, myth, and history interact with the imagination, as in the Edwardian explorations of the liminal space on the borders of our known reality. (50)

Thus Tolkien, like Blackwood, shows beneath the countryside's appearance of "consolation, recreation, and escape [. . .] a catalyst for ancient nature-myths, the supernatural, and horror" (51).

In the concluding section, Simonson contrasts Bilbo's journey "there and back again" to mere Haggardian imperial adventure, as involving "more profound discoveries concerning the value of the natural world as a catalyst of transcendence and a fruitful recovery of older traditions" (52). In telling of Frodo and his companions, then, Tolkien explores this more deeply: encounters with the wider world and its various ancient cultures "[open] their minds to new possibilities"—none more so than seeing Sharkey's work in the Shire itself (53). They return to a Victorian / Edwardian culture "imbued [. . .] with a post-Romantic desire to merge with the natural world and the older traditions," effecting a recovery for themselves and for the reader (52).

Adriano Monti-Buzzetti's "Middle-earth Meets the Dreamlands: Visions, Influences, and Analogies in J.R.R. Tolkien's and H.P. Lovecraft's Secondary Worlds" (55-86) seems to me to be more accurate than effective. It defends the position that the polarity of *Tolkienian* and *Lovecraftian* fantasies is exaggerated: granted all the very real contrasts between their lived experiences and philosophical principles, they read many of the same authors, and Tolkien clearly makes use of horror while Lovecraft found a pleasure in wonder that recalls Tolkien's emphasis on Recovery. This is all true enough, but the argument is diffuse; in particular, the constructive section of the essay makes surprisingly little specific use of the detailed discussion of common readings. I would note that the essay at one point describes Gurthang as

> a black and enigmatic sentient blade whose lugubrious
> malevolence is difficult not to associate with the more-or-
> less conscious inspiration for the demonic sword
> Stormbringer from Michael Moorcock's dark fantasy saga of
> Elric of Melniboné. (81)

Gurthang and Stormbringer are both modelled on the sword of Kullervo, but Moorcock writing in the 1960s could not have been influenced by the then-unpublished tale of Túrin, as the passage seems to suggest.

Holly Ordway's chapter, "The Mystical Face of Fairy-stories: Tolkien and the Use of Allegory in Fantasy" (87-105) notes Tolkien's several frequently-quoted negative comments on allegory. A synopsis of the scholarly discussion of these remarks leads to the main question,

> whether Tolkien's views on allegory are (at least to a certain extent)
> self-contradictory, unsettled, or ambiguous, or whether there is an
> internal consistency and coherence, at least to some degree or at
> some level. (89)

Ordway argues that one element to be borne in mind is Tolkien's rhetorical practice, in particular saying something striking when his actual belief was more nuanced (she points, for example, to his remarks on Dante as juxtaposed with his long membership in the Oxford Dante Society, 90). Bracketing his more hyperbolic comments, then, she considers Tolkien's use of "allegory" in academic settings. His definition of the term in the "Introduction" to *Pearl* stresses that a work only qualifies as "allegory" if the whole work taken together yields a consistent symbolic interpretation (92). Thus *Leaf by Niggle* (like *Pearl*) has allegorical elements but is not an allegory as a whole. *Smith*, similarly, has what Tolkien considers a plainly discernible religious allegory, but, whether or not we agree on how obvious the allegory is, it is certainly not the whole of the story.

Ordway then turns to "consider whether Tolkien had something approaching a coherent underlying view of allegory, especially in regard to the way that fantasy might be used to express religious ideas" (97). In *The Allegory of Love*, she notes, Lewis contrasts allegory (of the sort that Tolkien certainly did not like) with writing which takes the real world as the vehicle, and the archetypes as the tenor. This latter genre Lewis calls "sacramentalism or symbolism" (98, citing *Allegory* 56-7), and, Ordway suggests, it describes Tolkien's use of allegorical elements well. As a Catholic he might not have approved of the identification of "sacramental" and "symbolic," but he might also have rejected Lewis's claim that the allegorical excludes the mystical and the mysterious:

> he was unwilling to abandon allegory as a concept entirely; rather, he seems to have had a view of allegory that included, or could include, the more mystical, sacramental aspect that Lewis cordons off as something else. (99)

A brief consideration of George MacDonald as a possible influence then brings Ordway to a discussion of Tolkien's comments about religion in "On Fairy-stories." In the lecture, Tolkien points to MacDonald as an example of fairy-stories with the face of the "Mystical toward the Supernatural" (101, citing "On Fairy-stories," 44). This mythopoeic aspect of fairy-stories can be illustrated indirectly from Tolkien's comments on the Old English *Exodus*, a poem which is, on the one hand, allegory in the strict sense, with events of biblical history mapping onto the life of the Church Militant and the life of the individual, and, on the other, a tale ending in eucatastrophe. Ultimately, Ordway says,

> Our consideration of the 'mystical face' of fantasy, and our exploration of what we might cautiously refer to as a sacramental approach to allegory, at least open up additional interpretive avenues for aspects of his work that have usually hitherto been considered as contradictory or undeveloped. (105)

In the fifth essay, "Religious and Catholic: Primary and Secondary World in Tolkien's Letter no. 142" (107-126), Ivano Sassanelli applies tools of canon law interpretation to Tolkien's letter to Fr. Robert Murray, S. J., and to Murray's later comments on the correspondence, arguing that the two famous sentences from the letter exhibit a strict parallelism. Tolkien writes:

> I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *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)

"Religious," Sassanelli says, relates specifically to "the order of Grace," while "Catholic" pertains to "Our Lady" (110-111). More specifically, Thomistic theology distinguishes the "order of Grace," God's own life (including the supernatural structuring of Creation), made known by revelation, from the "order of Nature," the created world presented to the senses. But the created order of Nature is compatible with the uncreated order of Grace, and indeed points to it, in a general way (as Aquinas's Five Ways would prove the existence of a generic

philosophical First Cause without demonstrating any of the truths revealed in salvation history). Tolkien's subcreation, then, is "religious," and even "Christian," in that it shares with the Primary World that compatibility with, and that pointing toward, Grace (112-114). The role of the Virgin Mary in salvation, however, cannot be inferred from nature, but is known from revelation: and given the papally defined dogmas of Mary's Immaculate Conception (1854) and Assumption (1950), that role is known fully only through the Roman Catholic church. Thus Murray's association between Galadriel and Mary is not merely religious or Christian, but specifically Catholic.

With all that established, Sassanelli considers two possibilities. The first is that the religious and Catholic elements in Tolkien's subcreation are matters of unconscious influence, the results of Tolkien's immersion in Christian and Catholic culture. The second is that

> Catholic elements in *The Lord of the Rings*, which justify its Catholic nature, cannot be explained only as conscious or unconscious additions of the author but are rather miraculous gifts from God – at least according to Tolkien. (118)

In support of this claim, he quotes at length from Letter 328 ("If sanctity inhabits his work or as a pervading light illumines it then it does not come from him but through him.").

Finally, Sassanelli turns to the question of allegory and applicability, rejecting psychological readings as a particular form of allegorical reading (123), and pointing to Tolkien's use of "exemplification" as more useful (124). In a concluding section, he proposes that rather than characterizing Tolkien's secondary world as either Christian or Pagan, we should see it as religious, catholic, and hallowed (125-6).

Michaël Devaux's "Hope and Its Meanings in the *Athrabeth* and Tolkien's Theological Dialogue" (127-142) insists on reading the text as one would a Socratic dialogue, that is to say, with attention to its dramatic, evolutionary, character. Thus, in contrast to other studies which simply take *estel* as theological hope, he gives detailed attention to the ways in which the characters' understandings of *amdir* and *estel* change as their conversation goes on. The conclusion includes a chart outlining this development, from Andreth's original sense of "hope" as "an expectation based in knowledge or experience" (identified by Finrod as *amdir*) to her account of the "Old Hope" that Eru will redeem Arda by entering into it, an idea which Finrod recognizes as *estel*, even though Andreth has not only denied that Men have *estel* but has also said that she does not believe in the Old Hope. Devaux points out that the dialogue thus also encapsulates the theological point that it will be the role of Men to announce this Old Hope to the

Elves, despite the fact that Men are the one whose "hearts have been corrupted by Melkor" (141).

Łukasz Neubauer's "'You have conquered.' *Ego te absolvo*: Boromir's Penance and Aragorn's Role as a Spur-of-the-Moment 'Confessor' in *The Lord of the Rings*" (143-159) is, the author explains (145), something of an off-shoot of a larger study of Boromir, which will include a more detailed discussion of the death scene. Thus his focus here is largely on Aragorn's role, and on the influence of Tolkien's Catholic sources in his work, not as allegory, but to show how the "'lesser things of a fairy-story' are enriched by the colouring of 'greater things' (to paraphrase Tolkien's words in letter 213 . . .)" (145). The first main section of the essay begins with a review of the elements of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as currently defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (not significantly different from those in place in Tolkien's lifetime, he observes, 146): a note here (147) mistakenly provides the English text of the conclusion of the standard formula of absolution, "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" as the translation of the shorter Latin text for emergency absolution, *Ego te absolvo ab omnibus peccatis et censuris, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* ("I absolve you from all sins and censures in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"). Both Thorin's death scene in *The Hobbit* and Boromir's in *LotR* can be seen as acts of Reconciliation, and notably each scene includes a character to hear the confession (unlike, for example, the deaths of Beowulf and Bryhtnoth, by which we might have expected Tolkien to be influenced).

The second section narrows its focus, with particular attention to ways in which Aragorn conforms with standards expected of a skilful confessor, such as maintaining the penitent's confidentiality and pressing the penitent for a more complete examination of his conscience. Again, a footnote here is problematic. It says, "in the Middle Ages it was usually a rare, sometimes even once-in-a-lifetime (and often *pre-mortem*) event" (149): but "usually" and "rare" seem to me to be overstated. Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1264, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, required "all persons of either sex" to receive Holy Communion (and thus to make a Confession) at least once a year, at Easter. Arguably, the decree's codification of earlier policies wouldn't have been necessary if people had been flocking to Reconciliation and Mass, but neither was it the dead letter the footnote seems to me to suggest.

The third section then considers three reasons why Aragorn might serve in this role: his character as a Christ-figure in general; more specifically, his sacral kingship, reflecting the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King; and, mundanely, the simple fact that he is the one character in the right place at the right time. Yet again, a footnote goes astray, translating Melchizedek as "'king-priest' (from מֶלֶךְ: [*melek*], 'king', and כֹהֵן [*kohen*], 'priest')" (155)—whereas

the components are, rather, *melek* and *ṣeḏeq*, interpreted as "king of righteouness" or "Righteousness [deified] is my king." The section ends by observing that "strange as it may seem" in light of the modern *Catechism*, "in the absence of a priest, confession to a comrade-in-arms was not unusual amongst medieval knights and was practised well until the sixteenth century" (158). But this practice seems less strange in light of, e.g., the *Summa Theologica*'s opinion that, just as Baptism may, in case of necessity, be administered by a lay person, so also "the minister of Penance, to whom, in virtue of his office, confession should be made, is a priest; but in a case of necessity even a layman may take the place of a priest, and hear a person's confession" (*Supplement to the Third Part*, Q. 8, a. 2).

In a concluding section (158-159), Neubauer argues that, in its similarity to Reconciliation, Boromir's death scene provides one of the novel's eucatastrophic moments.This anticipation of a Primary World joy "helps to explain the emotional effect it has upon so many modern readers, both Christian and non-Christian" (159).

The final essay, "The Maiar in Middle-earth: Sub-creative Collaboration and the Secret Fire" (161-177) by Giuseppe Pezzini and Guglielmo Spirito, brings the collection to a robust conclusion. Despite the more general title, the essay in fact focuses on Olórin, asking how his work, especially as Gandalf, fits with the Ainur's preeminent character as subcreators, as "servant[s] of the Secret Fire" (164, citing *Lord of the Rings* 1.2.5, 354). Because the Ainur enter Arda only at the beginning of the playing out of their Music, their activity within their own subcreation is (in Tolkien's metaphor) a sort of gardening, tending and encouraging the growth of both the seeds they have planted, and those planted, without their knowledge, by Iluvatar himself—particularly the Eruhini. Having failed in their overt management of the Eldar, the Valar adopt more subtle techniques in the Third Age, particularly in sending five Maiar to be incarnate as Istari, forbidden to reveal their angelic power: as the only one of these to remain loyal to their task, Gandalf is the deputy gardener *par excellence* (and also, by nature and by possession of the Ring of Fire, the one closest to the Secret Fire).

All that being said, the authors consider that such tending and management may seem to lack some artistic, imaginative, element that we would ordinarily associate with "subcreation." Their answer begins with the etymology of Olórin from *olos* and *olor*, referring to a mental conception "capable of being by Art (Karmë) made visible and sensible" (171, citing *Unfinished Tales* 396-397). Thus even already in Valinor, Olórin has passed unseen or incognito among the Elves, "and they did not know whence came the fair visions or the promptings of wisdom that he put into their hearts" (171, citing *Silmarillion* 30-31). And his work as Gandalf continues this pattern of "fertilising the garden of the imagination" (172): his ascerbic rescue of Frodo on Amon Hen, his healing of Théoden, and his raising morale in Minas Tirith are three examples from among

many. In concluding remarks, the authors suggest further study of (1) Olórin's similarities to specific Christian understandings of angels, particularly guardian angels and (2) "Tolkien's secondary pneumatology . . . lead[ing] to a better understanding of the nature of the Secret Fire . . . which integrates all sub-creators and all sub-creations into a single, polyphonic artistic event" (177).

<div align="right">

John Wm. Houghton
The Hill School, Emeritis
Pottstown, Pennsylvania

</div>