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Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth (2016) by Lisa Coutras

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Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth, by Lisa Coutras. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xvii, 279 pp. \$95.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781137553447. [Also available in ebook format.]

This excellent study (revised from a King's College, London, Ph.D. dissertation) is, to the best of my knowledge, the only monograph on its subject: but it would be required reading if there were a shelf-full of similar volumes. The book comprises an Introduction, Conclusion, and fourteen chapters arranged into six parts: "On Myth," "On Creation," "On Language," "On Good and Evil," "On Tragic Heroism," and "On Women." Concerned to use a close investigation of Tolkien's aesthetics to address the broad, and broadly debated, question of the relationship between Tolkien's Catholic faith and his literary art, Coutras scaffolds this investigation by reading Tolkien in light of the aesthetic philosophy of the formidable Swiss theologian, and cardinal-designate, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988)—an approach suggested to her, she observes, by the Lewis scholar Michael Ward (xi). The specific linkage Coutras finds between Balthasar and Tolkien is the concept, analyzed in the former and worked out in the latter, of "transcendental beauty rooted in Catholic theology" (1)—that is, of absolute Beauty considered theologically as a neo-Platonic ideal alongside Being, Simplicity, Truth and Goodness.

In the two chapters of "On Myth," "A Theology of Beauty" and "Primary Truth," Coutras reviews the debate over Tolkien's personal Catholicism and use of paganism in his *legendarium*, suggesting that "a theology of beauty" will provide a framework for reassessing these issues (10). A 1944 letter from Tolkien to his son Christopher identifies "sanctity" as "the beauty of goodness" (12), and this provides a segue to an overview of Balthasar's theological aesthetics in relationship to Tolkien. In particular, an understanding of transcendental beauty as rooted directly in the creative act of God leads to discussion of Tolkien's ideas of subcreation, and of the use of pagan elements in both Lewis and Tolkien: insofar as they reflect true beauty, the pagan myths also reflect God the creator; and yet as products of fallen humanity, their "beauty is affected by human sin" (22). An overview of "On Fairy-stories" then introduces consideration of mythmaking as a way in which "the Christian can contribute to the restoration of creation" (38).

The second part, "On Creation," includes three chapters, "The Light of Being," "Incarnate Beings," and "The Wonder of Being." Considering Tolkien's creation story and the particular role he assigns to light, Coutras observes that the successively less-sacred sources of light in Arda reflect its "decline" from one age to the next and thus imply the "concept of original design" as "a major structural element to Tolkien's mythology" (58). In Tolkien's universe, transcendental light appears in the world as beauty, and this is suggestive of Balthasar's doctrine that human beings, as those creatures which have the deepest interiority, also have the

deepest inner light, and that beauty results from the combination of surface revelation and unrevealed depth (65-6). Similarly, Elves “emanate the inner light of their being” on the surface without disclosing their full glory, except in such rare cases as Fingolfin’s combat with Morgoth (67). For both Elves and Men, as ultimately also for Dwarves, this interior light derives from Ilúvatar himself.

Elves and Men, being subject in their different ways to death (a topic Tolkien discusses at length in “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”), also reflect different experiences of wonder at the natural world (74). Elves, whose final end lies in the world, react to the world with constant wonder; Men, whose destiny lies elsewhere, grow quickly tired of the Universe in its character as Arda Marred and yearn instead for Arda Healed (79-80). Elves by their nature feel *Estel*, “a steadfast hope which accords with the inherent nature of existence” whereas Men “cannot understand [the transcendental light of created reality] with any sure knowledge” (81-82).

The two chapters of “On Language,” “The Law of the Logos” and “The Song of Lúthien,” begin with a return to the creation story, this time from the point of view of its character as the Great Music, in which “Tolkien presents the primordial light of being and Ilúvatar’s creative Word of power as one and the same” (94). In accordance with the doctrine of the *logos*, the Great Music is thus the source both of the order of the Universe and of human language, and “song [is] the origin and foundation of all language” (98, citing Kreeft, 162). Lúthien’s dual heritage as both Elf and Maia allows her to be articulate in song in the face of what would otherwise be ineffably horrific or transcendent. We see the horrific in her encounter with Morgoth: Finrod in his lesser conflict with Sauron can only appeal to the history of the world, whereas the *logos* of Lúthien’s song reaches back to her mother’s memory of the Great Music, “drawing upon the eternal *Logos* embedded in the structure of creation” (109). Beren’s heroic human *logos*, on the other hand, fits Balthasar’s idea of the “true word,” itself linked to the idea of *kenosis*, the divine self-emptying of God the Son described in Philippians 2:5-11. This leads Coutras to review Tolkien’s allusions to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in the “Athrabeth,” and thence to discuss Lúthien’s encounter with the transcendently ineffable, her singing before Mandos, in which she anticipates the Divine *kenosis* by abandoning her immortality out of her sorrowful love for Beren.

In the two chapters of “On Good and Evil”—“Being and Unbeing” and “The Splendor of Being”—Coutras takes on T. A. Shippey’s discussion of the tension in Tolkien between the Platonist tradition which sees evil as a privation of being, on the one hand, and, on the other, the pragmatic sense that there are evil things in the world which must be combated (I should note that my colleague Neal Keese and I have also written on this topic). Shippey pays insufficient attention, she feels, to Tolkien’s depiction of evil as a substantive privation—to the distinction,

noted by Verlyn Flieger, between mere darkness and the “desecration” and “denial” of light (128). The Ringwraiths illustrate that principle as applied to the “light of being” (129): but Frodo, in his last warning to Gollum at the Cracks of Doom, is simultaneously consumed by the fire of the Ring and revealed as a vessel of transcendent light, a “splendor that breaks through the darkness” (133). This splendor is characteristic of heroic courage (which Balthasar would characterize as a “life-form,” something which “is both an underlying structure of one’s life [. . .] as well as a temporal expression of being,” 139-140), further exemplified by Éowyn’s confrontation with the Lord of the Nazgûl.

In two chapters of Part Five, “The Tragedy of Túrin” and “Hope with Guarantees,” Coutras notes Tolkien’s often-discussed concept of “eucatastrophe” but moves on to consider the purely tragic, in which “sorrow [. . .] is capable of expressing the light of transcendental beauty” (153). On Balthasar’s analysis, such moments reveal the “essence of humankind, indeed of being as such” (155, citing von Balthasar, 103), pre-eminently in the Crucifixion. In this light, the catastrophe of tragedy reflects the Gospel as much as does the eucatastrophe of fairy-story: and Tolkien’s implicit recognition of this can be seen in the fact that Túrin alone of mortal men does not pass out of the world but remains in it to be the final destroyer of Morgoth and the redeemer of divine honor and glory, which Morgoth seeks to subvert. This fate is all the more remarkable given that Túrin’s death is a suicide. Tolkien had, however, cautioned that, while Frodo does, objectively, fail in his quest, he does so only as a result of the overwhelming influence of Sauron and the Ring, and after notably showing pity: and, Coutras argues, Tolkien deliberately (particularly in later revisions) emphasizes those same elements in the story of Túrin. Moreover, the notice in the “Annals of Aman” that Elbereth created the constellation Menelmakar as a prophecy of Túrin and his role in the Last Battle (replacing an earlier etiology which tied the constellation to a son of the Vala Tulkas) suggests that Túrin’s destiny is a telling example of how Iluvatar’s will always outstrips Morgoth’s efforts to undermine it. Túrin’s own defiance of the Valar would seem to present a further obstacle to his eventual destiny as Morgoth’s bane: but, Coutras points out, his role in the Last Battle is for the sake of all Men and the glory of Iluvatar, not for his own honor.

Finally, in the three chapters of “On Women” (Part VI), “Tolkien and Feminist Criticism,” “The Transcendental Feminine,” and “The Renunciation of Power,” Coutras makes the case for reconsidering one of the most long-lasting and “hotly contested” (189) critiques of Tolkien. Having noted, as a first premise, that a discussion of women in Tolkien’s writing should consider the whole legendarium and not simply *The Lord of the Rings*, she reviews Melanie Rawls’s analysis that Tolkien believed in feminine and masculine as spiritual natures, the former associated with the “common strengths” (195) of understanding and advice and the second with those of power and action. Elrond and Lúthien illustrate

individuals who appropriately balance masculine and feminine; Boromir shows purely masculine recklessness, whereas Éowyn (unwillingly) typifies purely feminine passivity. Other commentators have taken the absence of sex in *The Lord of the Rings* as evidence that Tolkien held negative views of female sexuality: but this is a misconstrual of Tolkien's idea that, whereas women are naturally monogamous, fallen men are not—though both sexes are called to chastity and fidelity. In the marriage of Thingol and Melian, Tolkien gives an example of what unfallen marriage might look like; Elvish society in general, particularly as described in “Laws and Customs of the Elves,” offers further detail of the ideal situation: males and females were equal in “talent, intelligence and activity” (207); marriage itself consisted simply in the mutual consent of the parties; fathers and mothers both had roles, albeit distinct ones, in naming children; males and females both refrained from other commitments while raising children; males typically governed, but Galadriel offers a female example.

Balthasar teaches that Christian faith grows out of archetypal experiences that are themselves “derived from a transcendental model or ideal” (217). Noting earlier authors who have commented on the point, Coutras says that Tolkien's actual attitude toward women begins with his understanding of Mary as “the perfection and fulfillment of Woman” (217), an archetype of value to both women and men (Boromir, for instance, “regains his honor” only when he adopts the Marian virtue of “humble self-sacrifice,” 218). Galadriel is a Marian figure, but the valkyrie element in her suggests that “the power and beauty displayed by the female warrior imply another expression of the transcendent” (220): even after her moment of conventionally Marian humility in refusing the Ring when Frodo offers, she remains powerful enough to throw down the walls of Dol Guldur (though I might argue that this shows her more as the wielder of a ring of power than as a woman warrior): thus, “The valkyrie is the manifest *power* of Marian beauty bestowed both in mystery and profundity” (225). This combination of “self-giving” and “heroic fortitude” produces “the transcendental feminine” (225), exemplified not only in Galadriel but also in Lúthien and Éowyn, and “indispensable” (226) to the defeat of evil. Lúthien in particular shows the distinctively feminine characteristic of “*light as beauty*” (228, italics in original) which breaks forth in the power of the valkyrie. Such “feminine displays of power,” Coutras says, are the “culmination” of Tolkien's “theological aesthetics”: Indeed, Tolkien's whole theology of beauty has its source in Mary, herself the transcendent ideal of beauty (230). Éowyn chooses the “life-form” of a shield-maiden, but only in reaction to Wormtongue, and as a result of self-sacrificing love for Théoden; she changes that life-form when Faramir recognizes her “femininity alongside her martial valor” (243), becoming instead a healer. That transformation has been widely criticized in Tolkien studies, Coutras notes, but a careful examination of his treatment of the shield-maiden motif shows that

Tolkien “upheld feminine strength while representing gentleness and humility as integral to masculine virtues” (246).

Throughout the text, Coutras gives ample and insightful references to earlier scholarship, making the book valuable as an introduction above and beyond the virtues of its own argument. The book is not, of course, flawless. At the largest scale, it is not entirely clear to me that providing Balthasar as a dialog partner for Tolkien is actually *necessary*; Balthasar's insights are valuable, and Coutras manages the pairing with aplomb, but I am not sure there is any place where her observations about Tolkien could not in fact have stood on their own. Then, too, the argument for the combination of the Blessed Virgin and the valkyrie in the transcendental feminine feels somehow forced to me, though not unilluminating.

Less significantly, there are various points where one further round of editing would have been helpful, whether to eliminate repetition (e.g., Finrod is identified as an Elf on page 70 and again on 99, Sauron as a Maia in the text on page 99 and again in the notes on page 103), to avoid stylistic infelicities (e.g., “Glaurung uses Túrin's pity to forsake Finduilas,” 162), or to correct mere problems of typography (“[I]nstantly” is divided by a line break after the closing bracket on 33, “[I]n” on 188). The book is the first I have seen to be available for purchase chapter-by-chapter: that revival of the medieval *pecia* system presumably explains why bibliographic information in the notes begins anew with each chapter. It may also, in some obscure way, explain the curious physical structure of the book, with odd-numbered pages on the left, and page numbers in the gutter rather than on outer corners.

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