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Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision: A Study of the Influence of Neoplatonsim in J.R.R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as "Being and Gift" (2020) by Michael John Halsall

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Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision: A Study of the Influence of Neoplatonism in J.R.R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as "Being and Gift" by Michael John Halsall. Foreword by Alison Grant Milbank. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020. xx, 273 pp. \$55.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781532641107; \$35.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781532641114. Also available in ebook format, Kindle \$9.99 ISBN 9781532641121.

This monograph is a revision of Halsall's 2016 University of Nottingham doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Assessment of the Influence of Neoplatonism in J.R.R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as 'Being and Gift,'* directed by Alison Milbank (who provides the foreword for this volume). It comprises, in addition to the foreword and an author's preface, six chapters. Appendices A, C, D and E illustrate, respectively, Michelangelo's Statues in the Accademia, Florence; Three Crosses in the Churchyard of Whalley Abbey, Lancashire; The Royal Standard of Gondor; and Iconography of the *Book of Kells*. Appendix B offers a synopsis of "The Tale of Tinúviel." The book is unindexed.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that the author engages both with the work of one of my teachers, the Rev. Professor David Burrell, C.S.C., and with an essay of my own: in each case, his remarks seem to me both accurate and generous.

Nearly a century ago, Harvard professor Charles Homer Haskins, one of the founders of modern study of the Middle Ages (and an adviser to Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference), argued, in *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*,¹ that the sort of cultural revolution associated with *Quattrocento* Italy had occurred before in European history, particularly in the period, beginning around 1070, in which the Latin West rediscovered much Greek philosophy, and met thought from the Muslim world for the first time. The most obvious intellectual shift was a new emphasis on the thought of Aristotle, whom Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) famously referred to simply as "the Philosopher"; but scholars point to a number of other developments, including a renewed emphasis on aspects of the largely Neo-Platonist thought of Saint Augustine. This Augustinian re-emphasis had the effect of delegitimizing some of those few ideas from non-Augustinian Greek-speaking Christian Neo-Platonism which had managed to make their way into the Latin intellectual world earlier in the medieval period. "Celtic" Christianity (to use an admittedly overbroad term) prominently preserved these embers of Greek thought, and, indeed, Johannes Scottus Eriugena ("John the Eire-born Irishman," c. 800-c. 877), master of the Palace School at the Frankish court of Charles the Bald, was notable for his acquaintance with, and translations from, the Greek patristic tradition.²

1 Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1927; revised edition, 1971.

2 Famous jokes of the Middle Ages: the twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury

Building on this general background, Alfred K. Siewers published in 2005 an essay, “Tolkien’s Cosmic-Christian Ecology: The Medieval Underpinnings,”³ which observed that because our received versions of Celtic legends grew out of, and were shaped by, this pre-Twelfth-Century, Greek-influenced, Christian culture, Tolkien’s familiarity with those legends contributed an Eastern Patristic element to his otherwise Augustinian frame of thought. In particular, Welsh and Irish legends carried over from the Patristic tradition the idea of the Universe as integrated with the Divine (140-141). They displayed this idea in their use of “overlay landscape” (140), the motif of a mundane geographical feature’s also being part of the Otherworld. Siewers finds in Tolkien’s depiction of such places as Lorien and Imladris an echo of this Celtic Otherworld, and reasons that Tolkien thus provides an “ecocentric” picture of Middle-earth as “a central character beyond human concerns” (140).

Halsall’s project, then, is to expand Siewers’ point into a full-scale examination of non-Augustinian Neo-Platonic resonances in Tolkien. The Amon Hen, so to speak, from which he undertakes this survey is the concept of life as “being and gift”: an idea with a considerable history of its own, but much to the fore recently in the work of the Anglican theologian John Milbank. The resulting investigation covers a great deal of ground: indeed, one of my few criticisms of the substance of the book is that the breadth of the discussion sometimes leaves me unclear about how the overall argument hangs together.

The six chapters of the book are:

1. “Prolegomenon to the Sub-Creative Genius of Tolkien amongst / and His Contemporaries” (3-19; the title is given differently in the table of contents and at the head of the chapter)
2. “Creation and the Metaphysics of Music: Tolkien’s Philosophy of Createdness as ‘Gift’” (21-102)
3. “The Concept of Life as ‘Being and Gift’ in Tolkien’s Literary Corpus” (105-164)
4. “Tolkien, Eriugena, and the Conjoining of Borrowed Traditions” (167-210)
5. “A Diversion towards Mutability and the Possibility of Evil” (213-233)
6. “Concluding Comments: There and Back Again” (235-242)

passes along the (improbable) story that once, when the two were seated across from each other in a drinking bout, King Charles, thinking himself clever, asked John “*Quid distat inter sottum et Scottum?*” “What separates an Irishman (a ‘Scottus’) from a drunk (a ‘sot’)?”—the implied answer being “Not much.” The philosopher replied, however, “*Tabula tantum*”—“Only the table.”

- 3 *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages*, Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, editors. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 139-153.

Chapters Two through Five make up the heart of the book. In Chapter Two, discussion of the Music of the Ainur allows Halsall to show at the outset that Tolkien's philosophy is syncretic, deploying the Thomistic idea of "'createdness' as gift" (16) rather than the more common Neoplatonic concept that the universe arises by emanation from the transcendent One. Chapter Three uses examination of the story of Beren and Luthien to argue: (a) that Tolkien draws both on philosophers like Boethius and medieval literature like *Beowulf*; (b) that his view of creaturely freedom is "broad[ly] Augustinian and Boethian" (17); and (c) that he uses "doom," including death as the doom of humankind, in a narrow sense as a synonym for "providence." Chapter Four, building more directly on Siewers' earlier work, expands the concept of freedom to include, for example, the freedom of "transformation": "from life to death (Beren) and from elf to mortal woman (Lúthien)" (18). Finally, Chapter Five considers Tolkien's understanding of how intrinsically good creatures can turn toward evil.

While Halsall typically shows himself to be reliably in command of his wide array of theological materials, details of Tolkien's writing slip through his fingers with disturbing frequency. For instance, the statement that "Later in the tale, as the Valar depart Valinor for ever, and return to *Eä*, then all music ends" (50, citing *Silmarillion* page 47) confuses the transcendent realm of Eru with Valinor, a place *within* Eä—and, indeed, one not yet created at the moment under discussion (curiously, Halsall typically uses Valinor correctly, c.f. 64, 113, 185). Similarly, he frequently refers to the continent of Middle-earth when he means the whole created world, c.f. 49, 102, 128, 236—but uses the term correctly on page 129.

On page 59, Halsall adds editorial clarification to a quotation: "In the Music of the Ainur, each of the deities is given both the Flame Imperishable and the freedom to adorn the Great Music with 'his [Eru's] own thought and devices'" (p. 59, citing *Silmarillion* page 15). But this is wrong on two levels. First, the clarification is simply incorrect reading: Eru is the one who is speaking, and "his" can only refer to the individual Ainur. The point of the sentence is, rather, that Eru gives the Ainur freedom to use *their own* "thought and devices"—a fact which, as it happens, supports Halsall's overall point; in fact Halsall has the correct reading on page 72. Second, Eru does not say that the Ainur are "given" the Flame Imperishable, but rather, "since I have *kindled* you with the Flame Imperishable" (emphasis mine). This small distinction seems to me to be key to Tolkien's metaphysics. As beings created by a Creator ("kindled with the Flame"), the Ainur (and we) artistically sub-create; but they (and we) do not *have* the Flame in the sense of being able to give it to their (nor our) creations: it is only Eru who can "send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable" (20) and give being to their (but, sadly, not our) song.

I mention briefly a few further examples. Note 62, page 37, suggests that Halsall doesn't recognize "Dark Enemy of the World" as an expanded translation

of Fëanor's epithet "Morgoth." On page 105, he makes the *ur*-error of Tolkien scholarship, referring in the plural to the author's "most famous works—*The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy." The claim that "Huan (the dog) and Lúthien become giant fell bats" (p. 113) fails to see that Tolkien's "Clad in *these* dreadful garments" (*Silmarillion*, page 178-9, emphasis mine) refers to *both* "the ghastly wolf-hame of Draugluin, *and* the bat-fell of Thuringwethil" (page 178, emphasis mine).

There are also some errors with respect to the Primary World. On page 15, if I understand a somewhat obscure sentence correctly, Halsall seems to say that there are 15, rather than 12, tones in the Western scale. On page 32, the statement "Greek Zeus 'Pater' becomes Jupiter" (n. 41) confuses development from a common ancestor with succession. Later, Halsell misunderstands the Dickens-Chesterton-Tolkien "Mooreeffoc" meme to be the result of seeing a sign in a mirror, rather than looking out through a window (77). He incorrectly links "real" (in the sense of "actual") to "Middle English roots in what is 'royal,' 'majestic' and 'kingly'" (120; the word in fact derives Latin "realis," from "res," a thing, a matter). He apparently (again, if I understand correctly) fails to recognize that "Shield Sheafson" is merely Tolkien's modernization of the name "Scyld Scefing," rather than a stage in the development of the "legendary figure" (116).

There are, as well, a few gaps in references to the existing scholarship. As a 2020 publication, the book should arguably have been updated to at least acknowledge Lisa Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth* (2016)⁴ or that book's slightly earlier incarnation as a dissertation—something that Halsall *does* do with the dissertation (2009) and published version (2017) of Jonathan McIntosh, *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie*.⁵ Similarly, Claudio Testi's *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth* (2018)⁶ or its antecedent essay in *Tolkien Studies* 10 (2013), p. 1-47, might possibly have merited mention as bearing on Tolkien, Aquinas and Grace. I note with some hesitation that section 3.3.2, "Boethius, Alfred and the Timelessness of God," fails to cite any of the extensive literature on this question, including Shippey's original comments in *The Road to Middle-earth* (pages 140-146; though Shippey's ideas are mentioned in passing, with a reference to *Author of the Century*, on page 11) and "Tolkien, King Alfred and Boethius: Platonist Views of Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*" (*Tolkien Studies* 2 [2005], 131-159) in which Neal K. Keese and I have discussed much of the same secondary material as Halsall.

Finally, the book shows repeated signs of needing careful attention from an editor or proofreader. There are repeated irregularities of comma usage; many sentences defy syntactic analysis; and trivial errors accumulate (e.g., Boethius'

4 New York, Palgrave Macmillan

5 Kettering, Ohio, Angelico Press

6 Zurich and Jena, Walking Tree Press

singular-number *Consolatio Philosophiae* is uniformly cited as *The Consolations of Philosophy*, plural; the *Ainulindalë* becomes instead *The Ainulindalë*; “Anglian” is “Anglican” on page 120).

This study has the potential to be significantly more useful than it is likely to be in its present form. Perhaps a thorough revision will prove possible at an early date.

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