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The Nature of Middle-earth (2021) by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Carl F. Hostetter

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The Nature of Middle-earth, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Carl F. Hostetter. London: HarperCollins, 2021. xxii, 440 pp. £25.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780008387921. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021. xxii, 440 pp. \$32.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780358454601. Also available in ebook formats.

In September 1954, just a few months after the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* was published, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in a letter to his friend Hugh Brogan, “If you want my opinion, a part of the ‘fascination’ [of *The Lord of the Rings*] consists in the vistas of yet more legend and history, to which this work does not contain a full clue” (*Letters* 185). During Tolkien’s lifetime, there were several hints that more legend and history did exist and might be published as *The Silmarillion* (see Anderson). Of course, none of that legend and history (or any other aspects of those vistas) ever was published during Tolkien’s lifetime, despite (or perhaps because of) his exhaustive efforts.

Christopher Tolkien, Tolkien’s son and literary executor, ultimately published *The Silmarillion* in 1977, constructed from several different versions of the legends and history (see Kane, generally). Christopher quickly realized that there was more material that would be of interest to those fascinated by Tolkien’s secondary universe. As Christopher wrote about the tales contained in his next offering, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (published in 1980), “the argument for their publication is not different in its nature, though it is of lesser force, from that which I held to justify the publication of *The Silmarillion*” (*UT* 1). Despite its title, *Unfinished Tales* included not only narrative tales but also a taste of some of the descriptive and historical underpinnings of those heretofore uncharted vistas. In *Unfinished Tales* Christopher suggested that he might dive even deeper into the history of this father’s legendarium, noting that he hoped to publish the original version of the Fall of Gondolin, and the rest of the Lost Tales that formed the first flowering of Tolkien’s invention (*UT* 6). The publication in 1983 and 1984 of the two volumes of *The Book of Lost Tales*, ultimately led to the 12-volume *History of Middle-earth*, which not only included various different narrative versions of the tales that formed the *Silmarillion* narrative (and a fascinating look at the drafting process that resulted in *The Lord of the Rings*) but also a greater detailing of the philosophical underpinnings of Tolkien’s legendarium and particularly issues related to death and deathlessness, and the nature of the various denizens of Middle-earth and beyond.

After *The Peoples of Middle-earth*—the final volume of *The History of Middle-earth*—was published in 1996, Christopher proceeded to publish a stand-alone version of *The Children of Húrin* in 2007. He went on to publish editions covering the other two “Great Tales”—*Beren and Luthien* and *The Fall of Gondolin*—in 2017 and 2018, respectively, though unlike *The Children of Húrin*, those books did not consist of continuous narrative but rather a compilation of the different version

of those tales that Tolkien had written over the course of his life. Those books mostly (and in the case of the latter two, entirely) consisted not of new material but rather a repackaging of material that previously had been published. With Christopher Tolkien's death in January 2020 at the age of 95, it appeared that would be the end of the exploration of "the vistas of yet more legend and history."

However, just a few months later, in June of 2020, news leaked of an upcoming new book, *The Nature of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl Hostetter, a NASA computer scientist and long-time Tolkien scholar who is the head of the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship, the group entrusted by Christopher Tolkien to edit and publish his father's linguistic writings. The leaked information from the publisher noted that this book would comprise of "numerous late (c. 1959-73) and previously unpublished writings by J.R.R. Tolkien on the 'nature' of Middle-earth, in both chief senses of that word: both metaphysical and natural/historical" (Tolkien Collector's Guide).

Published in September 2021 by Harper Collins in the UK and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in the U.S., *The Nature of Middle-earth* consists of dozens of scraps of texts (mostly taken from hand-written manuscripts written in black or blue nib-pen, though a few come from typescripts), ranging in length from a single paragraph to a dozen or more pages, loosely divided into three different "Parts" (with some of the texts being very loosely pigeonholed into the category of the Part in which they are placed). Of course, with a book of this nature with such diverse subject matter, different readers are likely to find different portions of greater and lesser interest. Even with *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's most popular and successful work, Tolkien observed "that the passages or chapters that are to some a blemish are all by others specially approved." (*FR*, Foreword to the Second Edition, xxiii). This is even more true with material such as that presented in this book. As Tolkien stated in a draft letter in 1956 talking about preparing appendices for *The Lord of the Rings*, "while many like you demand *maps*, others wish for *geological* indications rather than places; many want Elvish grammars, phonologies, and specimens; some want metrics and prosodies—not only of the brief Elvish specimens, but of the 'translated' verses in less familiar modes, such as those written in the strictest form of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse (e.g. the fragment at the end of the *Battle of the Pelennor*, V vi 124). Musicians want tunes, and musical notation; archaeologists want ceramics and metallurgy. Botanists want a more accurate description of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin*, *mallos*, and *symbelmyñë*; and historians want more details about the social and political structure of Gondor; general enquirers want information on the Wainriders, the Harad, Dwarvish origins, the Dead Men, the Beornings, and the missing two wizards (out of five)" (*Letters* 248).

This new book has many of these things: biology (particularly Elvish biology but also some fascinating details of fauna and flora of Númenor), geology, maps

and diagrams, and (of greatest interest to this reviewer) a very deep dive into some of the thorniest and most profound philosophical, spiritual and theological questions raised by Tolkien's legendarium. A surprising number of the texts have been published previously in various journals but are rightly included in this book to give them a wider readership. Many of those texts are among the most compelling and valuable included.

PART ONE: TIME AND AGEING

This first Part is dominated by Tolkien's obsession with finding a correct formula for how the Eldar aged in Valinor compared to in Middle-earth (complete with extensive mathematical calculations and tables), as well as rejiggering the legends to incorporate a round earth and the Sun and Moon being part of the original structure of Arda rather than the fruit and flower of the Two Trees, to make the legends astronomically correct. While interesting in places, this material is confusing and fails to reach any satisfying resolution.

These texts help to show why Tolkien was unable to complete *The Silmarillion* to his satisfaction. As Tolkien wrote in a letter to Rayner Unwin in a letter in March of 1955, "I am not now at all sure that the tendency to treat the whole thing as a kind of vast game is really good—cert. not for me, who find that kind of thing only too fatally attractive. It is, I suppose, a tribute to the curious effect that story has, when based on very elaborate and detailed workings of geography, chronology, and language, that so many should clamour for sheer 'information', or 'lore'" (*Letters* 210). These pieces show just how fatally attractive this type of thing really was to Tolkien. Some are painfully detailed as he searched, often in vain, for different solutions to the problems he was encountering (or, as some might say, inventing). As Christopher Tolkien stated in a 1992 interview for the JRRT centennial video "[The 'Silmarillion'] had simply become too big . . . he was too tired. Too old too tired" (Bailey).

The texts in this part that are the most intriguing are those that delve into the nature of the Elves and their perception of reality. For instance, in an essay on "Time-Scales" Tolkien notes, "This speed of growth and rate of ageing had nothing to do with the *perception of time*. As the Eldar say of themselves (and this may in some degree also be true of Men) when persons (in whole being *fëa* and *hröa*) are fully occupied with things of deep natural concern and delight to them, and are in great bliss and health, Time seems to *pass quickly* and not the reverse" (23). And further on that same page, he observes that child-birth "is achieved by a much greater expense of the vigour of *hröa* and *fëa* (of 'youth' as the Eldar say) than is usual among Men" and that therefore "the Eldar did not (if they could avoid) enter into the 'Time of the Children' in times of trouble, or wandering."

In the essay in “The Awakening of the Quendi” Tolkien reveals some interesting details of the role of the Valar in relation to the Children of Eru. “The Valar had, of course no *precise* knowledge of the time of that ‘Awaking’. Not if—*as seems essential*—the Vision (subsequent to the Music) stopped short of the actual ‘Coming of the Children.’ The Ainur were vouchsafed a Vision of the Children, but not of their exact place in the sequence. Later Eru deliberately did *not* inform Manwë of the approach of the time: for He did not intend them to be dominated, and the function of the Valar was to prepare and govern the *place* of their habitation. Even so the Valar should have kept better watch, and not have allowed Melkor peace in which to establish himself” (34).

Later in that same essay, Tolkien discusses a fundamental difference between the Eldar and Men, and in the process provides a key observation about the nature of mankind as Tolkien saw it. “The Quendi never ‘fell’ in the sense that Men did. Being ‘tainted’ with the Shadow (as perhaps even the Valar in some degree were, with all things in ‘Arda Marred’) they could *do wrong*. But they *never rejected Eru*, or worshipped Melkor (or Sauron) either individually, or in groups, or as a whole people. Their lives, therefore, came under no general curse or diminishment, and their ‘life-span’, coextensive with the remainder of the life of Arda, was unaltered—except only insofar as, with the very ageing of Arda itself, their *primitive vigour of body* steadily waned” (36). He uses almost the same language in another essay, “Concerning the Quendi in Their Mode of Life and Growth,” and goes on to observe that “under force and fear they might do the will of Melkor or Sauron, and even commit grave wrongs. But they did so as *slaves* who nonetheless in heart knew and never rejected the truth” (88). However, this observation is contradicted during Tolkien’s struggles to fit Maeglin into the timeline that accommodates his evolving views on the ageing of the Eldar. In attempting to explain that Maeglin was born in Aman, not Beleriand, he concludes that Eöl was not one of the Avari or the Teleri, but rather like Isfin (Aradhel in *The Silmarillion*) was a disaffected Noldo. Tolkien then states “The story must then be entirely altered and Maeglin must also be born in Aman. His sinister character will then be accounted for the fact that he (and his mother and father) were specially attracted by Melkor and grew to dislike Aman, and their kin” (76). This, of course, conflicts with the claim that none of the Eldar willfully followed Melkor.

As Hostetter notes in his introductory comments to the chapter entitled “Key Dates,” a particularly significant detail is the suggestion that Melian and several of the Maiar who would in the Third Age become the Istari were sent by the Valar to Cuiviénen as guardians of the newly awakened Elves (93). This would put a different spin on the history of the Istari, particularly with regard to the story told in *Unfinished Tales* of the choosing of the Istari and of the reluctance of Olórin (Gandalf) to go because of his fear of Sauron, and the description of him there as “a lover of the Eldar that remained” (see *UT* 393).

Several apt observations are made in the essay “Time and its Perception.” Tolkien writes “The question of ‘perception of Time’ is more difficult to deal with, since it varies with persons, circumstances, and kinds of persons, and it is difficult also to express or communicate, so that when the Eldar conversed with the Atani on such matters neither side was sure that they understood the other clearly. And again the *fëar* of Elves and of Men are not corporeal or subject [?actually] to Time, and [are] able to move it in in thought and retrospect and so can have divergent views on the subjective length of one and the same time or experience” (159). Later in the same page he adds, “In Age to Men (and Elves) years seem to go swiftly they say, but that is for various reasons, some really of ‘reasoning’ rather than feeling. They go ‘swiftly’ because of experience: (1) as few new things or none are encountered, there is little to [?save] in a memory [?stocked]. (The mind is also duller and hardly notes the present.) (2) there is all the same *no desire to come to the end*, or rather *desire not to do so*; the time therefore seem to stop though [?hands] are unable to stay it. As if two travelers went along the same road; the one has never journeyed there before, and he is young and full of hope, maybe eager to reach the end and enter upon other roads; the other has travelled the same way many, many times, and barely notes the things seen or passed, and he is tired maybe, and yet fears to reach the end, having little hope of going on to further journey” (159-160). It is worth noting that this was written (according to Hostetter) in 1959, so while not among the very last of Tolkien’s writings, at 67 he was certainly in the sunset of his life and speaking very much from his own experience.

It is important to understand that Tolkien’s purpose in creating separate races was really to illuminate different aspects of humanity. As he wrote in a draft letter to Michael Straight, the editor of *The New Republic*, in 1956, in response to several questions Straight had asked about *The Lord of the Rings*:

Elves and Men are just different aspects of the Humane, and represent the problem of Death as seen by a finite but willing and self-conscious person. In this mythological world the Elves and Men are in their incarnate forms kindred, but in the relation of their ‘spirits’ to the world in time represent different ‘experiments’, each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness. The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men. That is: they have a devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as ‘other’—sc. as a reality derived from God in the same degree as themselves—not as a material for use or as a power-platform. They also possess a ‘subcreational’ or artistic faculty of great excellence.

They are therefore ‘immortal’. Not ‘eternally’, but to endure with and within the created world, while its story lasts. (*Letters* 236.)

The final text of the first part is different than the rest of the writings in that section, but it is of considerable interest. It is a very short fragment from the Grey Annals that “for reasons that eluded even Christopher Tolkien” (166) was collected with the “Time and Ageing” bundle of texts and (presumably) for that reason was not discussed in *The War of the Jewels*. Particularly noteworthy is “an otherwise unpublished poetic version of Fingolfin’s challenge of Morgoth to battle before the gates of Angband” that (as Hostetter notes) clearly derives from *The Lay of Leithian* (see *Lays* 285):

Come forth, thou coward lurking lord
to fight with thine own hand and sword!
Thou wielder of hosts of slaves and thrall,
pit-dweller, shielded by strong walls,
thou foe of gods and elven-race,
come forth and show they craven face! (166)

PART TWO: BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

The second part has a mix of material that ranges from the most mundane to the most profound. Among the former are such observations as the fact that (contrary to images so familiar from adaptations) that men of Númenórean descent such as Aragorn, Denethor, Imrahil, Boromir and Faramir are beardless (187) or that Gandalf “had in fact more knowledge of birds and beasts than Radagast and was regarded by them with more respect and affection” (193).

Of greater interest is a short text entitled “Mind-Pictures” describing images that a superior mind (or one exerting itself under great necessity) could impose upon another mind, which had previously been published in *Parma Eldalamberon* 17, in which it is noted that when these kind of mind-pictures were induced by Elves it would mislead Men into taking them as “real” things and that while this was not meant to be intentionally deceitful, it was taken by the Men as being so (198-199). This is reminiscent of the “Faerian Drama” that Tolkien discusses in his essay “On Fairy-stories.” He wrote there, “‘Faerian Drama’—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. . . . [I]n Faerian drama you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving, and the knowledge of that alarming fact may slip from your grasp. . . . You are deluded—whether that is the intention of the elves (always or at any time) is another question (*TOFS* 63). Flieger and Anderson note in their commentary on

this section that Tolkien's description actually "does little to clarify the concept" (*TOFS* 112). This short text on "Mind Pictures" helps to fill that gap.

One of the most important essays published in the book is "*Ósanwe-kenta*," 'Enquiry into the Communication of Thought.' This essay was originally published in slightly different form in 1998 in *Vinyar Tengwar* 39. However, giving it the wider readership that publication in a widely publicized book is certainly justified. There is much of interest in this essay, but I will just focus on one point that many readers of Tolkien's work have considered regarding the Valar's dealings with Melkor. Tolkien writes: "If we speak last of the 'folly' of Manwë and the weakness and unwariness of the Valar, let us beware how we judge. In the histories, indeed, we may be amazed and grieved to read how (seemingly) Melkor deceived and cozened others, and how even Manwë appears at times almost a simpleton compared with him: as if a kind but unwise father were treating a wayward child who would assuredly in time perceive the error of his ways. Whereas we, looking on and knowing the outcome, see now that Melkor knew well the error of his ways, but was fixed in them by hate and pride beyond return. He could read the mind of Manwë, for the door was open; but his own mind was false and even if the door seemed open, there were doors of iron within closed for ever" (214). Tolkien then goes on to explain why, despite this seeming weakness, Manwë was demonstrating great wisdom, and doing the will of Eru. This passage provides as strong a window into Tolkien's philosophical and spiritual views as anything that he has written.

Yet another piece previously published in *Vinyar Tengwar* 41 in 2000 consists of linguistic notes on Quenyan term Órë which "is glossed in *the Lord of the Rings* (*III* 401) 'heart (inner mind)'" (219). These notes were associated with the text "The Shibboleth of Fëanor" that was published in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* but are well-worth including here. This short fragment contains some noteworthy observations of human nature. Tolkien writes that the Elves did not believe that there were fundamental differences between their faculties and that of Men, but that because of their different histories, and above all the fact that human bodies were subject to such quicker decay, they used their mental facilities differently. Tolkien notes that the brevity of human bodies "imported into human thought and feeling 'haste': all desires of the mind and the body were far more imperious in Men than in Elves: peace, patience and even full enjoyment of present good were greatly lessened in Men. By an irony of their fate, though their personal expectation of it was brief, Men were always thinking of the future, more often with hope than dread, though their actual experience gave little reason for the hope" (220). Later in these notes Tolkien wrote "The Eldar thought that some disaster, perhaps even amounting to a 'change of the world' (sc. something that affected all its later history), had befallen Men which altered their nature, especially with regard to 'death'. But of this Men, not even the Atani with whom they became closely associated, could never speak more clearly than to refer to 'the shadow behind us' or 'the dark we

have fled from” (222). This then launches into an interesting discussion of the text “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth” (published in *Morgoth’s Ring*), which though becoming somewhat illegible towards the end seems to suggest that (as Hostetter notes in his brief commentary) “through their acceptance of him as God, Melkor gained access to the *óre* of Men, so that only the wisest could distinguish between the uncorrupted counsel of the *óre* and the evil promptings of Melkor” (223).

Another interesting text that was previously published in *Parma Eldaméron* 17 is titled “The Knowledge of the Valar; or Elvish ideas and theories concerned with them.” This text contains a helpful observation regarding the long-running debate about fate and free will in Tolkien’s legendarium. Tolkien notes that the Valar were “on trial” as an aspect of the mystery of “free will” in created intelligences. On the one hand, they knew enough about Eru’s design to take responsibility for guiding the development of that design, but on the other hand, the Children of Eru were left a mystery to the Valar, and therefore they (both Men and Elves, despite the oft-quoted statement that only Men were not subject to the Music) “were *not* subject to the subcreative activities of the Valar.” Tolkien adds that a purpose of the Children, which also was a mystery to the Valar, “was to complete the Design by ‘healing’ the hurts which it suffered, and so ultimately not to recover ‘Arda Unmarred’ (that is the world as would have been if Evil had never appeared), but far greater thing ‘Arda Healed’” (233).

One of the most substantial pieces in the book is one that had previously been published in 2014 in volume 3 of the French journal *La Feuille de la Compagnie*. This essay, or rather, complex of papers, concerns “Elvish Reincarnation.” The papers begin with a conversation between Eru and Manwë in which the former gives Valar the authority to remake the body of Elves that have died but reserves to himself the power to have them reborn (248). Among the comments that follow is a discussion of whether the *fëa* rehoused would then be the same person as that who had died (248-249). Another note-worthy item in one of the further texts is the specific observation that since Eru committed the Dead of mortals also to Mandos, who waited there until going to Eru, and that since the sojourn of Frodo in Eressëa was only an extended form of this, his sailing on the ship from the Grey Havens was in fact “equivalent to death” (262).

The final text in this Part is entitled “Death of Animals and Plants.” In this text Tolkien observes that incarnate bodies do not necessarily die when the *fëa* departs. This results in allowing a circumstance in which Morgoth (and later Sauron) “would drive out the *fëa* by terror, and then feed the body and make it a beast. Or worse: he would daunt the *fëa* within the body and reduce it to impotence; and then nourish the body foully, so that it became bestial, to the horror and torment of the *fëa*” (272).

PART THREE: THE WORLD, ITS LANDS, AND ITS INHABITANTS

The last Part, entitled “The World, Its Lands, and Its Inhabitants,” is another mishmash of different texts of various degrees of interest. Some go to the heart of the nature of Tolkien’s secondary universe. Others are of more pedestrian interest.

One chapter of great importance consists of a bundle of two texts, with draft materials, entitled “The Primal Impulse.” These texts are challenging but are worth looking at closely as they address some of the most fundamental questions of creation in Tolkien’s secondary universe (which of course is a reflection of the primary universe). Tolkien writes that the prime impulse “does not belong to Eä (and therefore not to Arda). It must be referred to uttermost beginning: the ‘Theme of Eru’, as He first propounded it, before the *Ainulindalë* in which the Spirits whom He had made and instructed cooperated in the elaboration and working out of the Theme. Thus the *Ermenië* (which is a ‘Devise of Eru’) being before the *Ainulindalë* is also before *Eä* (the Realization)” (287-286; see also 249 and 256 in the essay of Elvish Reincarnation which also touch on these matters). Profound stuff, requiring repeated readings and much consideration.

Another short text addresses the “Powers of the Valar” in assisting Eru in the creation of the universe. “In ultimate truth they did not in fact ‘make’ even corporeal life, which proceeded from Eru. But they had assisted in the general design of Eä, and severally, in different degrees and modes, in the production from the *erma* (or prime substance) of things of many kinds. The idea of life and growth came from Eru, but the Valar, under Him, devised the shapes and forms of living things” (292).

On the other end of the spectrum, the most interesting (and already much commented-upon) text addressing more mundane matters is the text “Of the Land and Beast of Númenor.” Most particularly, the great black bears who “would perform dances for the entertainment of their human friends” (335) has piqued the interest and tickled the funny bone of many early readers of the book.

APPENDICES

There are two brief appendices included. The first provides a series of descriptions of the metaphysical and theological themes included in the book with interpretative commentary by Hostetter interspersed. The second is a helpful glossary and index of Quenya terms included in the book.

EDITORIAL CHOICES

Hostetter’s editorial voice in this book is for the most part more limited than that of Christopher Tolkien in the volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* and in

Unfinished Tales. Hostetter mostly allows what Tolkien wrote to speak for itself and includes considerably less commentary relating the texts included in the book to previously published material than Christopher Tolkien did.

However, the presentation of some of this material is in places unnecessarily redundant, confusing, and contradictory. Much of this is due simply to the nature of the writings themselves, particularly the texts in the first Part related to Time and Ageing. Hostetter arguably could have presented less of this material while still giving a flavor of the dilemmas that Tolkien had created for himself. On the other hand, readers not as interested in this material can simply skim or skip over these texts and move to the sections of more interest to them.

Another issue is that several of the texts appear to be included despite having been previously rejected by Christopher Tolkien (and not just for reasons of space). For instance, in Part One Hostetter includes a chapter entitled “Eldarin Traditions Concerning the “Awakening.” This chapter consists solely of the manuscript version of a typescript that had already been published in *The War of the Jewels* (59) and the differences between the two are slight. Similarly, a chapter from Part Two entitled “From *The Statute of Finwë and Míriel*” consists solely of a short “apparently supplanted text” from the material on this subject that was published in *Morgoth’s Ring* (267). There are also several texts included in Part Three that were omitted from previously published books, particularly *Unfinished Tales*. For instance, there is a short paragraph on the consumption of mushrooms by the Drúedain that was excluded from the chapter in *Unfinished Tales* yet included here as a separate “chapter” (342). There are also portions of the text “Concerning Galadriel and Celeborn” that overlap that which was included in the “History of Galadriel and Celeborn” section of *Unfinished Tales*. (346-355; see also *UT* 233-240). Many Tolkien scholars are likely to be happy to have as much previously unpublished material as possible, no matter how minor they are (or how repetitive), but their inclusion here adds nothing to our understanding of Tolkien’s work.

Of greater concern is that Hostetter appears to overstep his role as editor by imposing his own point of view onto the presentation of the material included. After quoting Tolkien’s oft-cited statement that *The Lord of the Rings* was a fundamentally religious and Catholic work In both his Introduction to Part 2 of the book (171) and the first appendix (401) he then goes on to argue that that statement applies to Tolkien’s legendarium as a whole, stating, “it is my hope that the writings collected in this volume will support this.” (401-402.) This is contrary to the editorial practice established by Christopher Tolkien, who at no point in the works of his father that he edited and published ever made such a blatant statement of intent to present a particular point of view. There is no question that *one aspect* of Tolkien’s creation is that was highly influenced by Tolkien’s deep Catholic faith. However, it is too limiting to call it ‘fundamentally religious and Catholic.’ Indeed, the very person Tolkien made that statement to, Father Robert Murray, later wrote

in a letter to a graduate student who had asked him about the statement, “Tolkien was a very complex and depressed man and my own opinion of his imaginative creation . . . is that it projects his very depressed view of the universe at least as much as it reflects his Catholic faith” (West 135). In her essay “The Arch and the Keystone,” Flieger quotes Murray’s letter, and observes, “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’” (Flieger, 17). She adds, “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.” (*Ibid.*) As Flieger concludes, “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 . . . can see his work as Catholic yet describe it as not Christian.” (Flieger 17-18.) The works included in *The Nature of Middle-earth* reflect both sides of that nature, not just one.

CONCLUSION

In “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien famously wrote, “To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks” (*TOFS* 61). Despite the quibbles expressed herein about the presentation of the material included in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, there is no question that it helps to demonstrate just how much “labour and thought,” “special skill,” and “a kind of elvish craft” that Tolkien applied to the creation of his Secondary World, as well as the pitfalls that resulted. As such, this book provides a fitting coda to the presentation of the “vistas of yet more legend and history” that was only glimpsed at when *The Lord of the Rings* was first published.

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