MEDIEVAL REALISM AND MYTHOPOEIA: PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE IN TOLKIEN

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INTRODUCTION

According to Anderson and Flieger (2014: 9), J.R.R. Tolkien's essay *On Fairy-stories* is a "landmark in its field." In this essay, originally delivered as a lecture in 1939, and then published in 1947, Tolkien investigates the definitions, origins and aims of this literary genre, establishing connections between fairy-stories, philosophy, and religion which were not much debated at that time. However, some have criticized the essay, notably Tom Shippey (1992: 45), who considered it Tolkien's least successful piece due to its lack of a precise philological kernel.

In *On Fairy-stories*, Tolkien (2014: 27) sets himself the task of answering three questions: 'What are fairy-stories? What is their origin? What is the use of them?'. As a philologist at the University of Oxford, Tolkien displays his erudition about the European philological and folkloric collections available in his time, such as those of the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and, more importantly, Andrew Lang. Moreover, and unsurprisingly, he shows how knowledgeable he was about the philological theories on mythology and proposes a historical and philosophical reflection about the meaning of imagination and the religious tradition in the face of the technical and scientific progress.

The aim of this article is to argue that an adequate interpretation of that essay is promoted not by philology, even though it is considered in the text, but by the hermeneutics based on the philosophical tradition known as "realism" (see Brague 2013: 36–41; Pieper 2007: 55–69; and Reale 2014: 91–100). In short, philosophical realism is founded on the scholastic interpretation of the anthropological, gnoseological, moral, and ontological postulates inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle, which then comes to terms with Christianity through the Church Fathers (e.g., St. Augustine) and finally comes to be systematized in the medieval summae.

Such an interpretive view in *On Fairy-stories* emerges from the relationship between literary production and aspects of Christian philosophy, and, in that sense, the fundamental concept coined by Tolkien is *sub-creation*, specifically its connection with *fantasy* as contemplation. By offering this thesis, Tolkien highlights the connection between his theory about fairy-stories and the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. It is known that Tolkien studied Classics at Exeter College, Oxford, between 1911 and 1913, and, during that time, he had systematic contact with Greek authors of tragedies, not to mention Plato's dialogues (see Hammond and Scull 2017: 34, 44).

In addition to his well-known Catholic faith, widely acknowledged in his biographies, the organization itself of his literary conception is permeated by a worldview which is inspired by the medieval scholasticism that informed his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This theological perspective resurfaced in modern interpretations at the end of the nineteenth century, springing from the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, promulgated by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, which established the Thomistic philosophy as the primary orientation for Catholics. It is relevant as well to highlight the legacy of Cardinal John Henry Newman, a scholar of patristics, founder and mentor of the Birmingham Oratory, with which Tolkien's guardian, Father Francis Morgan, was associated (Carpenter 2002: 44).

Even though Tolkien was not himself a philosopher or theologian, he was an academic keen on Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and while his investigation lacked the system of scholastic thought, he weaved analogies, made comparisons, and added philosophical and theological references to his own reflections. More than an intricate treatise on Logic, Tolkien's essay shows his speculations more freely, unrestrainedly alternating between his philosophical interlocutors, now holding conversation with Plato and Aristotle, never losing sight of the paradigmatic reference of Christian tradition, be it the thought of Augustine or Aquinas.

Presenting Tolkien's investigation as *literary theory* calls for a delimitation on the meaning implied by that expression. The hermeneutic premises of this article starts from a philosophical perspective, so that the goal is not mainly directed towards the arguments advanced by literary critics at the time the essay was written. As mentioned before, we opted highlight the medium through which Tolkien reflected upon his own religious intellectual upbringing, i.e., through philosophical realism, particularly the recrudescent Neo-Thomism at the end of the nineteenth century. Therefore, literary theory is the group of concepts that form a comprehensive unity of the literary phenomenon, the fairy-story genre, in this case. Such comprehensive unity is configured by the delimitation of the *nature*, or *essence*, of fairy-stories. Both words or variations of them are used throughout the essay (Tolkien 2014: 32, 42 et passim).

The choice of the words *nature* and *essence* shows the possibility of interpretation through philosophy. *Essence* is one of the translations of the Greek word *eidos*, found both in Plato and Aristotle. It may also be translated as *form* or *idea*, referring to the structuring principle of the reality of being, and is directly related to *nature* (*physis*), understood as the principle of realization of the essence

in a concrete and individual being. For Plato, the essences are to be found in the World of Forms, a metaphor for the intelligible and immaterial dimension of reality, as substances in themselves, while for Aristotle they are in the individual being and can be abstracted by our intellect in the process of knowing. Indeed, to know something is to contemplate its essence (see Pieper 2007: 23–38 and Reale 2014: 155–60), and the definition of *theory* is precisely that contemplation.

Indeed, one can understand such contemplation (*theoria*) in three intertwined ways. Firstly, in the *Republic* (6, 486a), Plato claims that theory is the view of the totality of things. Secondly, in the explanation of the famous allegory of the cave (7, 517a–520c), he affirms that contemplation is the sight of the soul in its organ of knowledge, that is, the understanding of the intelligible beyond what is sensorial. Finally, in the same passage, Plato affirms that contemplation is different from craft, art (*téchné*), because it does not seek usefulness or domination, but the very realization of human nature through the comprehension of things.

To study our object according to the realist perspective of the above-mentioned authors, we have chosen four conceptual boundaries according to the *Summa Theologica*:

1. Nature and supernatural (I-II, q.114);

2. Art as an intellectual virtue (I-II, q.57), inscribing such activity into its mode of mythmaking (*mythopoeia*), in dialogue with Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *Republic*;

3. Active intellect and mythopoeia (I, q.87) in dialogue with Aristotle's *De Anima*;

4. The function of fantasy in relation to truth, particularly in education to contemplation (II-II, q.180), bringing up Augustine's *On the Trinity*, concerning the function of memory and imagination, and Plato's challenge in the *Republic*, requiring that poets present an argument to ensure their permanence in the polis, as long as they justify poetry as an art in harmony with philosophical activity.

These four issues—natural and supernatural, art as an intellectual virtue, active intellect and the function of fantasy in contemplation—substantiate Tolkien's connection with the realist tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, further supported by scholars such as Milbank (2007: 15), Candler (2008: 140-148), Anderson and Flieger (2014: 19–20, 110), McIntosh (2017: 8–28), and Testi (2018: 42, 68, 80).

RELIGION, NATURE, ART, AND CONTEMPLATION

A good way to start our investigation is to define fairy-stories according to Tolkien. For him, such narratives do not deal specifically with fairies—conventionally regarded from the nineteenth century onwards as minute beings with magical powers—but with Man's experience in the imaginary realm called *Faërie*. For Tolkien (2014: 44), fairy-stories have three faces:

> the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of Faërie is the middle one, the Magical. But the degree in which the others appear (if at all) is variable, and may be decided by the individual story-teller.

The perspective of the mirror of scorn and pity directed toward Man could be related to the genre of Greek tragedy, particularly according to Aristotle's *Poetics* (see Anderson and Flieger 2014: 19–20, 110). The most striking reference to that is Tolkien's inclusion, in his essay, of lines from his poem *Mythopoeia*.[1] Variations of the term "mythopoeia" can be found in Plato's *Republic* (2, 377–379), in reference to storytellers (*mythopaios*), and in *Poetics* (1451b–1452a), in which it is affirmed that the poets' production is much more related to the making of myths (*mython poieten*) than of verses (understood as metrical and syntactic rules).

The essential face of fairy-stories, for Tolkien, is the second one, the Magical, which is related to Nature. According to Testi (2018: 68), Tolkien conceived nature similarly to Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas's philosophical realism, according to which the term "nature" encompasses the set of abilities and attitudes inherent to the diverse beings, whether material, vegetable, animal, or human. Such a concept of "physics" (*physis*) as "nature" is attributed to the operating principle of the beings (i.e., the substantial forms that are realized in matter), not only as material structure (biological, chemical, or physical), nor as

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1 The poem *Mythopoeia* was written in the 1930s but was published only in the late 1980s. It is a dialogue between Philomythus (the "Myth-lover") and the Misomythus (the "Myth-hater"), in which they discuss the validity of myth as a conveyor of truth. It is a consensus to relate the theme and structure of the poem to the dialogues Tolkien held with C.S. Lewis about religion, mythology, and fantasy (see Anderson and Flieger 2014: 113).

environment or ecosystem. Therefore, nature is also teleological because it presupposes an end (*telos*), a meaning, a purpose in every being whose operating principle contains a goal which is inherent to their nature. Likewise, the anthropological distinction between nature and culture, typical of Tolkien's time and philological environment, cannot be fitted into the concept of nature as *physis*.

Finally, the third face is related to the Supernatural. The word *supernatural* is used five times by Tolkien in the essay, and it is related to the Elves, Men, and the mythical gods (Tolkien 2014: 28, 43–4). First, Tolkien denies that Fairies, or Elves, are supernatural, unless the prefix "super" is used as a superlative prefix. He claims that it is Men who possess a dimension that exceeds nature (Tolkien 2014: 28, 81), while Fairies are qualified as "natural". He claims, moreover, that the gods of mythology, being devised by Man's imagination, receive the shadow and the flicker of divinity, thus becoming truly supernatural.

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL

Following Aristotle's concept, Tolkien understands that "nature" is not only the environment, the whole of living things, but the principle of operation inherent to each being, modulating their development and purpose (*telos*) of realization (Testi 2018: 68). According to the scholastic tradition the word "supernatural" is used to refer to the principle of the whole Creation (understood as the nature of the beings as an autonomous activity), to God as Subsisting Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) and His Omnipotence in relation to Creation. Such a sense can be exemplified by the question in the *Summa Theologica* mentioned in the introduction of this article (I-II, q.114). There, it is demonstrated that without Divine Grace, a supernatural gift, it is impossible for Man to reach salvation, thus posing a heavy contrast between moral merit—an operation principle of the individual themself—and the need for supernatural aid to reach eternal life, which is gifted by God out of sheer love (*caritas*).

According to Marie-Joseph Nicolas (2001: 98), the word "supernatural" was conceived by St. Thomas Aquinas primarily in relation to the substance, that is, the origin and foundations of the effect that are above Creation, in a spiritual and intelligible way, such as divine revelations, innate knowledge, Incarnation, "supernature" being God Himself. Another way to understand supernatural, in a improper way, is concerning its mode, which refers to everything that does not conform to what is daily and ordinary, such as the sudden healing of a sick person,

the return from the dead, or an unusual behavior—according to the contemporary science—by animals or the forces of nature, such as miracles or angelic/demonic intervention. In this second use of the word, "supernatural" phenomena are part of the Creation, however uncommon.

That is the precise concept of Supernatural one finds in Tolkien's *On Fairy-stories*. Fairies are supernatural only in that they are superlatively connected to the Creation, for they are expressions of nature itself as possibilities of contemplation, hence their ability to integrate the quality of other substances present in material concreteness—water, earth, trees, wind, flowers, rocks, fire—including men themselves, normally merged with the elements (Elves of the Air; Stone Dwarves) or with other animals (wolf or bat shapeshifters, little men living in rabbit holes, and talking eagles).

On the other hand, only Man can establish a relationship to God and seek transcendence, through Creation itself as nature, noticing the operational principles of existing things and rationally investigating the confines of Existence. In connection with this, Tolkien (2014: 34–35) claims that the desires satisfied by the writing and reading of fairy-stories are the "communion with other living things," since they are connected in the chain of Being, founded on God Himself, and the "survey [of] the depths of space and time," by using intelligence to contemplate the order of Creation, traversing created things and finding the supernatural principle, the Subsisting Being which is the cause of the whole nature, but is not restricted to it. By living the mystical-religious experience with the transcendent, Man surpasses nature (understood as the group of created things) and, therefore, is more supernatural than fairies. As in Greek thought, the contemplation (*theoria*) of the essence (*eidos*) of Man, of the world, and the Transcendent is the basis of Christian medieval philosophy as a means to fulfill the purpose (*telos*) of human nature.

Some context regarding Tolkien's essay within the framework of the debates about mythology and fairy-stories is necessary. According to Flieger (2003: 26–29), the nineteenth century was the golden age of studies about mythology and folklore, particularly from the standpoint of philology and anthropology. Based on the nationalism stimulated by romanticism, scholars of those areas of knowledge sought a mythical identity for their nation states, often turning to the folkloric narratives and legends as the symbolic foundation of their people. In this sense, Tolkien establishes a dialogue, in *On Fairy-stories* (2014: 41–44), both with Max Müller and Andrew Lang, who represent conflicting views about the origins of such mythologies. For if Max Müller regarded mythology as a disease of language—a

deviation from the original reference to natural phenomena, anthropomorphized into deities—Andrew Lang in turn claimed, from the standpoint of the anthropological theories of his time, that mythology was an expression of Men's infantilization and primitivism arising from the fabulation of their most barbaric and irrational actions. In keeping with the thesis of this article, Tolkien's criticism of both—including the disputed meaning of *mythopoeic*, used by Müller (Flieger 2003: 30)—must be understood in the light of the realist philosophical tradition.

The devising of mythological gods occurs in that context. In describing Thor, for instance, Tolkien highlights some elements: his violent temper, his red beard, the power of storms, lightning and thunder, and the marvel before a deity, of a primordial, omnipotent cause permeating the whole of reality (Tolkien 2014: 43–44). Thor's personality derives from the class of blacksmiths, farmers and Norse warriors who worshipped the god himself and mirrored his existence in their imagination; the power of lightning and thunder was the spectacle celestial nature offered in the stormy nights of the North, while the flicker and the shadow hovered over existence infinitely, overflowing it with the causal power of existence. The latter aspect, which transcends both human personality and the marvel before Creation, is the Supernatural, the invisible world upholding the visible.

It is important to emphasize that this mythological composition of Thor described by Tolkien—which integrates I. characteristics of human personality; II. the amazement before the phenomena of nature; III. the perception of divinity—should not be understood as a panentheistic speculation, that is, a perspective that merges the essence of God with his Creation, even though such divine essence surpasses creation. This is not a description of Thor as if he were a real god in the Primary World, a subsidiary entity of the Creator. In fact, Tolkien is analyzing the composition of the mythical figure of Thor in the imagination of his worshipers and poets, showing elements of reality that served as material for this configuration in their minds.

In other words, in addition to the human virtues and vices and the qualities of natural phenomena, there is a third characteristic present at the origin of both myths and fairy-stories: the *Supernatural*. Tolkien (2014: 43) claims that men drew from nature the beauties with which they imaginatively adorned the gods, just as divine personalities could only be derived from human ones. However, the reverence, veneration, adoration and love those men devoted to the gods came, equally, through the human mind, from what Tolkien calls the invisible world, the *Supernatural*. In fact, although they are not the same thing, there is a relationship

between mythology and *Divinity*, the latter being the only one that has the right to claim the worship of man.

> Something really 'higher' is occasionally glimpsed in mythology: Divinity, the right to power (as distinct from its possession), the due worship; in fact 'religion'. Andrew Lang said, and is by some still commended for saying, that mythology and religion (in the strict sense of that world) are two distinct things that have become inextricably entangled, though mythology is in itself almost devoid of religious significance. (Tolkien, 2014: 44)

By mentioning Andrew Lang at this point of the essay, Tolkien includes a note referring the reader to Christopher Dawson's *Progress and Religion*, in which the latter defends the thesis that mythology is different from religion (1945: 86–91), a conclusion that arises from ethnographical and anthropological studies of the time (late nineteenth century and early twentieth). According to Lang's theory, religion is about the worshipping of the founding power of the world, while mythology seeks to explain the phenomena in a mythic and fantastic way, usually referring originally to primitive, savage, and irrational customs (Flieger, 2003: 33–34).

For Dawson, the essence of religion is not the belief in mythological beings, but "an obscure and confused intuition of transcendent being—an "ocean of supernatural energy," "*pelagus substantiae infinitum et indeterminatum*"" (Dawson, 1945: 90), a Latin quote straight from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, (I, q.13, a.2) which is related to the Subsisting Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). In that context, according to Tolkien (2014: 42–43), fairy-stories share the same kind of "mind building" of allegedly nobler myths, such as the Greek or Norse ones, even though relegated to more prosaic perspectives, being composed by human qualities (the condition of Man), natural (the environmental phenomena of Creation) and supernatural (in that they evoke Divine Transcendence).

ART AS AN INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE

In the second issue proposed by this article, we emphasized the expression *Sub-creation* as an intellectual virtue of art, according to the philosophy of Aquinas. Tolkien uses the terms *sub-creator*/*Sub-creation* three times in his essay (2014: 42, 59, 78). In the first mention, he refers to the imaginative devising of myths and

fairy-stories, such as Thor, but mostly to the mental operation of Man, who transfers qualities from one thing to another, bringing about an innovative resignification. This can be seen, for instance, when one gives wings to a man, symbolizing his proximity to the skies and to God; or coloring green the face of a deceased who still is able to move, thus creating a frightful undead. Such a perspective of Art as *téchné* and *poiesis*, in the Aristotelian and Thomist tradition, is endorsed by Alison Milbank (2007: 21, 23, 142–43, 166–68) and Jonathan McIntosh (2017: 6, 21–24), particularly in the relationship those authors establish between Tolkien's theoretical assumptions and the philosophical foundations of Jacques Maritain in his *Art and Scholasticism*, emphasizing the romantic view of nature in search of a (neo)Thomist synthesis, something characteristic of European Catholics in the first half of the twentieth century.

This artistic sense of sub-creation is compared to Magic (Tolkien 2014: 32), a word used in a somewhat unstable way throughout the essay, given that the author himself changes its use as he proceeds. On the one hand, the word "Magic" is understood simply as the human capacity to change reality, which, for Tolkien (2014: 63) is equivalent to Art (*téchné*), a close concept to modern technology, morally neutral, as we can read in the letter 131, sent to Milton Waldman, probably written in 1951 (Tolkien 1995: 145-46). On the other hand, the word is also used to describe the manipulation of Man's will, such as the Platonic *goeteia* used in the *Republic* (3, 413c), the crafts and charms used to test young people's virtue during their training to become guardians of the city. Again, in the letter to Waldman, Tolkien (2014: 146) affirms that morally evil purposes in the use of magic will lead to "the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills."

In fact, in the unsent passage of a letter to Naomi Mitchison on 25 September 1954, Tolkien (1995: 199–200) develops his concept of "magic", distinguishing it from *goeteia*. In Tolkien's *legendarium*, *magia* or even *goeteia* are not good or evil *per se* but morally conditioned by their purpose or their use. The bad motive, for Tolkien, was the domination of wills, such as the Platonic *goeteia*, even though Sauron, through his machinery, also produced real effects in the physical world (magic as *téchné* seeking usefulness). On the other hand, the Elves also used magic as a technique to produce physical effects ("like fire in wet faggot"). In the same draft, Tolkien claims that the basic motive for magic is the reduction "of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect" (Tolkien 1995: 200).

In the essay, Tolkien (2014: 64) refers to Magic in a third way as well, an elvish Enchantment engendering mythopoeic art, closely connected to language (Shippey 1992: 46–50), enabling mythmaking (*poiesis*), *Faërie* itself, whose end is wonder (*thaumaston*)[2] before nature, arising from new sub-creative fabulations (Tolkien 1995: 146), but not deceitfully: the goetic effect is purely artistic (Tolkien 1995: 200). This elvish Enchantment is a form of *goeteia* (in the sense of molding men's desires and feelings) and at the same time an art (despite being a technique whose material alteration in the world is language itself). However, in line with Plato's conception of theory, this third conception of magic has as its objective neither the domination of hearts and minds nor the instrumental usefulness of real world, but the wonder (contemplation) at Creation.

In summary, the basis of sub-creation is the function of devising images, imagination. Such a definition for *imagination (phantasia)* is Aristotle's in *De Anima* (427b16–428b30), in which he describes the ability of human mind to form images (*phantasma*), much as Tolkien (2014: 59) himself defines imagination in the essay, relating it with fantasy. The difference between the simple capacity of forming images in the mind, i.e., imagination—particularly understood as memory—and the capacity of creating inexistent forms in primary reality, i.e., fantasy, is that the latter is the product of this art: the sub-creative literary work. It is in that passage that Tolkien (2014: 59) mentions *Sub-creation* for the second time. Fantasy is the connection between the images produced by imagination (memory), and the finalized artistic expression in a text, sub-creation, whose excellence, for Tolkien, depends on the "inner consistency of reality."

In order to understand what "inner consistency of reality" means, one should go back to the *Summa Theologica* (I-II, q.57), in which Aquinas explains that art as a practical intellectual virtue, whose end is to create something beyond Man, must be in consonance with the speculative intellectual virtues, i.e., science, understanding, wisdom. They are responsible for the excellence in comprehending reality as it is: *science* searches for the necessary causes of things; *understanding* investigates the logical principles of thought (such as the noncontradiction, identity,

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2 The expression "wonderful" (*thaumaston*) is repeated in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452a, 1456a, 1460a), and refers to contemplation, admiration, and wonder in the face of reality, which is incomprehensible and irrational, prompting poetic description and the search for a philosophical explanation. In his essay, Tolkien employs the expressions *wonder* and *marvel* in much the same way as Greek *thaumaston*.

and the excluded middle); and *wisdom* searches for the first principles of reality, of Being as Being (Metaphysics itself).

In sum, Art, both for Aristotle and Aquinas, comprises the Beautiful, the Good, and the True, thus integrating the realist tradition. It is a practical activity which must follow the parameters of reality which inspires it, even if it contributes in an unprecedented way to that reality. That is the "inner consistency of reality" to which Tolkien referred. Indeed, according to Castro (2009: 88–89), education for Aristotle is based on the formative unity comprising nature (*physis*), habit (*ethos*), and reason (*logos*), the latter being enhanced by the integration of intellectual virtues, whether practical or speculative. For Reale (2014: 75, 158–60) and Brague (2013: 38–39), that is the classical concept of Beauty. For Plato, as one can perceive from *Phaedrus* (272d–274b), and indeed for the whole classical tradition, Beauty is Goodness in visible form, that is, the revelation of the supersensible by perceptible senses. Therefore, Beauty is always an expression of Goodness and Truth. As supported by Candler (2008: 140-144), this conception of art as intellectual virtue is in dialogue with Tolkien's theory.

Such a reflection can seem strange within an essay about fantasy, but Tolkien (2014: 60) claims that that strangeness is an advantage of Fantasy as the basis of fairy-stories, provoking a contemplative look upon reality. That is the recovery function of fairy-stories (Tolkien 2014: 67–68). He further claims that the more dissimilar sub-creation is from the Primary World, the more skill is required from the sub-creator to maintain the inner consistency of reality. Hence his insistence on the goal (*telos*) of fantastic literature as a source of possibilities to a new outlook on the world (Tolkien 2014: 65–66), recovering the meaning of words in relation to their tangible referents in the world from a strangeness that is capable of generating wonder.

Thus, the integration of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is expressed in the affirmation of Fantasy as a rational and artistic activity (Tolkien 2014: 59–60) and, because of that, it is necessarily linked to Truth in its inner consistency of reality, just like "Good versus Wicked" (Tolkien 2014: 53), important both in the Primary and the Secondary Worlds, and the desire of Man's heart for a world with dragons, because it would be richer and more beautiful (Tolkien 2014: 55). With respect to moral Goodness specifically, McIntosh (2017: 211–22) and Testi (2018: 127–36) affirm that Tolkien understood the laws of moral and virtue, foundations of realist philosophy, as necessarily consonant elements between Creation and sub-creation.

Returning to Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452b–1452a), we reaffirm his recommendation that a poet should be a mythmaker (*mython poieten*), considering Tolkien's poem *Mythopoeia* (2014: 65). Some of its lines are quoted in *On Fairy-stories* and the word *sub-creator* is also found there. In chapter 9 of the *Poetics* (1451a15-1451b11), poets are also instructed to follow the requirements of *necessity* (*ananké*) and *likeliness* (*eikos*) in artistic composition, such as those found in reality by the intellectual virtues of science, understanding and wisdom in their search for the universals. The Aristotelian postulates are an important endorsement to the philosophical interpretation of Tolkien's inner consistency of reality: the inner consistency of a sub-created work must be in metaphysical consonance with the primary reality, apart from showing an internal coherence within the sub-created world itself, contained in its own fictional universe.

Even though the concept of *mythopoeia* comes from Antiquity, Christian appropriation of it reached its apex during Romanticism. In the case of *On Fairy-stories*, the most explicit presence of Romanticism appears in the comparison between S.T. Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' (Anderson & Flieger 2014: 107) and Tolkien's concept of 'secondary belief' (2014: 52–53). However, as shown by Milbank (2007: 10–25, 142–48), even though Tolkien shared with the romantics both the criticism of Enlightenment—with its rationalist and empiricist verve—and the renovation of interest in nature's symbolism inspired by Neoplatonism and the investigation of interiority, his Catholic, Neo-Thomist formation, informed by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* and Cardinal Newman's legacy, led him beyond Romanticism and to try to conciliate his faith and his reflections about fantasy and imagination with the realist philosophical tradition.

In the letter n. 153, dated September 1954, Tolkien explains to the Catholic editor Peter Hastings the metaphysical considerations in *The Lord of the Rings*, especially the nature of created beings and the limits of their free will and moral conscience. He touches on issues concerning Creation and Divine Omnipotence, making some concepts of the intellectual virtues (the laws of contradiction) explicit:

> We differ entirely about the nature of the relation of sub-creation to Creation. I should have said that liberation 'from the channels the creator is known to have used already' is the fundamental function of 'sub-creation', a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited, as indeed I said in the Essay. I am not a metaphysician; but I should have thought it a curious metaphysic— there is not one but many, indeed potentially

> innumerable ones—that declared the channels known (in such a finite comer as we have any inkling of) to have been used, are the only possible ones, or efficacious, or possibly acceptable to and by Him! […]
>
> Are there any 'bounds to a writer's job' except those imposed by his own finiteness? No bounds, but the laws of contradiction, I should think. […] I would claim, if I did not think it presumptuous in one so ill-instructed, to have as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home'. (Tolkien 1995: 188–94)

In this quote, the bound between Primary World and Secondary World is presented as a sub-creative dynamic between the perception of reality in a metaphysical sense, and the original artistic contribution of the mythmaking. From this perspective, the third use of the expression *sub-creation* appears when Tolkien (2014: 78) describes the gospels as the response to human yearning for *eucatastrophe*, a word he coined for the good catastrophe, the sudden turn to the happy ending in fairy-stories. The word *pathos*, which could be translated as "catastrophe", can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452b9), meaning a painful event present in tragic narrative, a turn to suffering.

Tolkien's eucatastrophe refers to the common element in fairy-stories as a sub-creative expression of a hope of conquering Evil, despite the unavoidable suffering in the world. Taking Christian narrative as a historical fact, Tolkien (2014: p. 78–79) describes it as the concrete answer to all the desires of sub-creation in its search for redemption, happiness, joy. He emphasizes that the gospels possess the inner consistency of reality because, apart from their *marvels*, perfect in their mythical significance—dealing with Man, Nature, and the Divine—they are the result of art as an intellectual virtue, because the evangelists themselves were not expert mythmakers: it was the Author of Creation and of the Primary World, God Almighty, who wrote the reality of that narrative with facts.

Tolkien's insistence in professing the truthfulness of the gospels (2014: 78), in spite of using the words *story* and *myth* to describe them literarily, can be summed up in the conclusion that, in the case of the gospels, *legend* and *history* are fused, bringing all the elements of fantasy to the primary reality of Incarnation. A note about Tolkien's *Mythopoeia* is here apposite. In the complete poem, as mentioned before, we are introduced to the *Philomythus*, the lover of myths. Testi

(2018: 80) affirms that the word *philomythus* is borrowed by Tolkien from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (982b1–983a1), referring to the individual who is perplexed by the marvels of which myths are made. Such admiration is the same of the one who *loves wisdom*, i.e., the *philosophos*: it is, according to Pieper (2017: 40–54) a necessary condition for a correct perception, purely receptive, of reality, the true platonic *theoria*.

Therefore, both the *Philomythus*, borrowed by Tolkien from Aristotle—who in turn brought the Homeric poetic contemplation to the philosophy derived from Plato—and the philosophical *Logos* claimed by the author of the Fourth Gospel as a way of talking about Christ, are united in the admiration of the wonders provided by both reality and fantasy, ordained in the inner consistency of sub-creations, whose purpose (*telos*) is the same as that experienced in contemplating what is real. Tolkien understands that the gospels are a story through that analogy of a philosophical perception of the importance of mythology: the gospels contain the essence of myth, describing marvels (*thaumaston*), the great eucatastrophe of the Primary World, the paradigm *par excellence*, satisfying the human desires that originate sub-creative art.

ACTIVE INTELLECT AND MYTHOPOEIA

In the essay, when referring to the process of mythmaking, Tolkien (2014: 41) employs the words *generalization* and *abstraction*, two processes used by the human mind to engage with reality. Realist tradition (Gardeil 2013: 110–22) understands that we know the universals, the forms or essence of things, by noticing the constitutive principle of an individual thing, abstracting (i.e., intellectually "plucking") the form of the thing we perceive through the senses.

This operation allows us to shape this universality, generalizing (i.e., shaping the genre of) a particular aspect and attributing it to other individuals of similar nature. Such processes can be found in Aristotle's *De Anima* (430a10–430a25), in the concept later denominated by medieval hermeneutics as *active intellect* (*nous poietikos*), translated by St. Thomas as *intellectus agens* in the *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 87, a.1). The active intellect is responsible for the mental dynamics that structure the passage of the potentialities of being known, which are inherent to the objects, to actuality in mind, allowing them (objects) to be apprehended. Just like the active intellect generalizes and abstracts the universal forms from the perception of material things, it is also the efficient cause of

realization, by means of poetic language, of the fantastic forms which make up Faery itself, by recombining elements from the Primary World.

When he mentions the adjective as something fundamental in the origins of fairy-stories, Tolkien (2014: 41) highlights a third operation of the mind which follows realist gnoseology: discrimination. By affirming that the grass is green,[3] the human mind distinguishes between substance and accidents, which Aristotle explains in his *Categories* (1b10–4b21). By discriminating that "grass" is the substance, the thing itself, and that "green" is an accident, something not essential to grass — which could be yellow, when dry, or black, when burnt, or brown, when covered in mud—human mind opens the possibility of recombining substances and accidents imaginarily, fantastically. Thus, it is possible to imagine some paradisiacal golden grass, or frightening fiery grass.

The stress on generalization, abstraction, and discrimination reinforces the reality of the world outside the mind, independent of language, which is, in fact, associated to the referent as perceived by the senses. St. Thomas endorses this view in his *Summa Theologica* (I, q.85, a. I), but Tolkien emphasizes that the incarnated mind, language, and story appear simultaneously in human development. The incarnated mind perceives the world as something independent, but it can only realize such a perception through language, which metaphorically creates the world it perceives. In the interplay between mind, language, and reality, all of them recombining substances and accidents, the possibility of begetting a new composition out of elements from the reality, inside the mind, by language, originates fairy-stories, the means Men possess to access Faery.

Tolkien presents the relationship between language, mind, and extramental world as the origin of fairy-stories and myth. This presupposes a universal functioning of human mind, which reaches far back to primitive men. Hence, the creation of the adjective as an expression of the three operations—generalization, abstraction, and discrimination—reflects both the human intellective capacity of distinguishing substances and accidents, and the possibility of imaginatively recombining these components.

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3 It is undeniable that Tolkien was impacted and influenced by Owen Barfield's theory of language put forward in *Poetic Diction*, which deals with language, myth, and human perception (cf. Flieger, 2002). However, while both Tolkien and Barfield criticized Max Müller, being supporters of the metaphysical perspectives, the difference between Barfield's Anthroposophy and Tolkien's Catholicism legitimates the identification of the active intellect in Tolkienian theory.

According to Tom Shippey (1992: 46–50), the use of the words *spell*, *enchantment*, and *glamour* in the original text, referring to the magic of Faërie, reinforces the orchestration between concrete and abstract in fantastic language, which defines its incantatory power. This conception of magic is close to the third form presented by Tolkien, which refers to the Enchantment of the Elves, different both from the *goeteia* that seeks the domination of the will and from the magic as the neutral technique of altering material reality (usefulness). In this sense, it is the Elvish Enchantment that manifests itself through poetic language.

Even more explicitly, Tolkien (2014: 42) stresses that Faërie begins when a quality (adjective) is removed from an extramental thing and is recombined in an imaginary, fantastic reality, conjoining many characteristics through the mind, and then materialized in language. At this point in the essay Tolkien (2014: 42) introduces the concept of *sub-creator*. In sum, what inaugurates Faërie is the creation of a new form, which is necessarily related to the objective qualities of the extramental things perceived by the artist and that, at the same time, is the contribution of Man, sub-creator, to Creation, the Primary World which is the work of the only Creator. Accordingly, Jonathan McIntosh (2017: 18–19), reaffirming Tolkien's realism, argues that

> For Tolkien and Thomas, things, being created by a God who is himself Being, are inescapably real. Things are there, they exist, they have their own mind-independent reality, yet a reality which, because dependent upon the divine mind by virtue of their created-ness, at the same time has a constitutional affinity with those human minds (created in God's image) that know and experience them.

It is important to emphasize the realistic essence of sub-creation. The conception of sub-creator is not a mere metaphor for the storyteller, but a double affirmation: first, gnoseological, because it presupposes certain organization of the human mind in its dynamics of sense, imagination, and intellect; second, metaphysical, because it understands the dynamics of incarnated human mind as part of an extramental reality possessing objective laws which can be partially comprehended by Man. The affirmation of such a capacity of access, and the formulation of the objective reality by human intelligence justifies our calling this philosophical perspective "realist tradition". As Candler (2008: 145-148) explains, Tolkien follows this analogical conception of reality, which means that there is a consonance between

things (physical, imaginary, and spiritual) in this world. The rediscovery of reality stems from its re-enchantment by the strangeness of the fantastic that is based in the operation of the active intellect.

In this sense, Aristotle (1459a1-1459a9) in his *Poetics* states that for the poet to express themselves well in metaphors they need to apprehend (*theorein*) the similarity and the difference between names and things. This contrast cannot be understood only by comparing mere names, that is, it must be guided by the apprehension of the extralinguistic existence of things. This means that a poet, in order to metaphorize well, must be skillful and virtuous in apprehending reality. In view of this, what the storyteller does is the artistic expression of said gnoseology in an individual who contemplates reality. The possibility of accessing Faërie through sub-creation, operated by language, results from understanding the composition of things and from the making of new forms. For Tolkien (2014: 35), the essential power of Faërie is to capture, literarily, the fantastic visions and satisfy the desire to realize the imagined marvel through mythmaking.

FANTASY AND CONTEMPLATION

The path we have walked so far leads us to the final question of this article: the function of fantasy in relation to truth. We have seen above that sub-creation is a result of fantasy, which is, in turn, the use of the powers of imagination to create images up until then unknown in the Primary World, such as a blue sun, a green sky, a swine-man and a lizard-god. We have also seen that said sub-creation is the expression of the intellectual virtue of art and, because of that, it must comply with the rules of necessity and likeliness in its inner consistency of reality. In other words, it must follow the general structures of what is real and simultaneously modify some aspects of the Primary World—i.e., "sub-create" beings, settings, and things, contributing to the contemplation of the general order of that reality.

In *De Anima* (427a17-428b30), Aristotle claims that imagination belongs to the sensitive soul, responsible for emotions, and, in the *Poetics* (1449b–1450a), he affirms that the goal of poetry, tragic in that case, is the catharsis, the purification of emotions. One infers, thus, that imagination, by bringing knowledge restricted to the sensitive soul, should be purified by the intellective soul in the philosophical process of making truth explicit. Even though Aristotle, still in the *Poetics* (1451b–1452a), considers poetry—which deals with the universals of human nature—more philosophical than history—which considers the particulars of an event—he does

not admit the possibility of a purely logical kind of knowledge (i.e., apodictic) being transmitted by imagination. Poetics is, at most, a preparation, or an instrument for philosophy, such as scholasticism considers philosophy in relation to theology.

In this sense, poetry is considered imitation (*mimesis*) of the forms (*eidos*) of reality. The "universals"[4] (*katahalon*) are seen as forms of the concrete beings, whether their nature or their substantial forms, such as a man, a tree, or a horse, or as a quality of any being, integrated in an individual, in their acts and character, such as courage or wisdom, cowardness or stupidity. However, the universals in poetry need not be the same as those in philosophy, because even though poetry surpasses history, which deals with particulars, it is not philosophy as a logical theory, devoid of the sensorial imagination. Thus, Aristotle himself, in the *Poetics* (1460b–1461b) grants to the poet the possibility of metaphorically fabricating men, gods, creatures, objects that do not exist in reality, as long as they follow the principles of likeliness and necessity towards marveling (*thaumaston*), along with the nature of man, its purpose (*telos*).

Indeed, Ricoeur (2005: 66–8) claims that the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* is not the same as the Platonic, since the latter understands it as a copy of visible nature, which is, in turn, a copy of a supersensitive Idea/Form (*eidos*). The Aristotelian *mimesis*, conversely, is an activity, a productive reason (*poiesis*), through which men can build different realities than the ones originated in nature, and connected to them at the same time.

By means of this emphasis, Tolkien claims that sub-creation is not only about the representation or an allegorical interpretation of the Real, but its purpose (*telos*) is a discovery, the invention of a new form (*eidos*), understood in its very nature, with unique qualities and a morphology unknown up to then. In other words, besides the green monster, one can create Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, and Hobbits, fusing "accidents" (in metaphysical sense) of known forms, such as men, angels, statues, pigs, wolves, bats, and gorillas. Here we bring back the first element of this

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4 The issue of "universals" is traditional in Philosophy. Aristotle, in *Categories* (Iab20–Ib20), claims that there are particular substances (primary, individual), universal substances (secondary, species, and genera), particular qualities (the virtue in an individual), and universal qualities (the form of the virtue). However, in *Metaphysics* (1038b10–15), he affirms that only the individual is substance, and seemingly discards the theory of the universals as a secondary substance. The "universals" disputation proceeds into medieval philosophy, and it "consists of establishing what the ontological statute of universals is: whether they are transcendental Ideas, God's thoughts and so forth, or whether they are only mental concepts, or even insignificant words only, or whether there exists a solution mediating the various positions" (Antiseri & Reale 2003: 154).

article, an example of these primary principles in the structure of reality, in the difference between natural and supernatural. According to Gilson (2000: 109):

> There is, therefore, a poietic world, made of poietic beings, located in the world of nature, yet specifically distinct from it. When the objects which compose it are not recognized as such, the worst may be feared, but whenever they are known in their true light, man treats them according to their own character and dignity, that is to say as works of art. Then it would seem that their origin in disinterestedness and their beauty which enriches the world deserves costly applause. […] Meanwhile, newcomers unknown to the state, the professors and the public, but some-times encouraged by even more obscure amateurs, yield to the old urge to add to the beauty of the world by producing more objects whose only end is to be beautiful, pleasing to see and desirable to own for their own sake.

Another way to understand this poietic world described by Gilson is to call it Elfland. That is one of Tolkien's great contributions to fairy-stories (2014: 30–32). The nature of this place, which he calls *Faërie*, is what defines the essence of fairy-stories. It is coherent within the interpretation methods of this article to claim that the Elfland is a metaphor—and, therefore, cannot be described analytically — for this dimension that lies between the Platonic realms, the Realm of Forms (supersensible) and the Physical Realm (sensible). This place is precisely the imagination that contains all forms sub-created by language in fact, and potentially "sub-creatable" by human creativity, establishing a relation, in a "Middle-earth", between what is perceptible by the senses and the intelligibility of Ideas.

In fact, Elves, Orcs, Dwarves, and Trolls are beings of fantastic thought, constituted from the information brought by the senses which, for Tolkien (2014: 41) are altered by the human mind, capable of abstraction and generalization, thus enabling the mythopoetic contribution to Creation. From the power of the adjective, that is, from the abstraction of quality from concrete beings (in Aristotelian terms) for the mind, the making of myths, the sub-creation of new forms is deployed and the Elfland becomes accessible for contemplation. As Tolkien (2014: 42) affirms: "new form is made; Fäerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.*"*

According to Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q.180), contemplation combines the goal of reason (to know things as they are) and of will (to rest upon something delectable according to reason). Aquinas shows the importance of imagination for the contemplation of truth, the ascending path from

the sensible elements to the intelligible, and then to the truths revealed by Faith. By commenting on Richard of St. Victor's considerations, Thomas Aquinas admits the inevitability of imagination as a means to acquire knowledge and contemplation, especially in the so-called reasonable imagination (the rise from sensible to intelligible in the study of the disposition and order of sensible things) and the imaginative reason (the understanding of sensible beings by the intelligible).

The beauty of narrative art as mythmaking (*mythopoeia*) leads to the contemplation of the perceived marvels (*thaumaston*), which follows towards the intelligible and the invisible world (*supernatural*), because that is precisely what binds the *philomythus* and the philosopher. In this sense, the gospels fulfill the desire for communion with other living things and to survey the depths of space and time that originate fairy-stories. According to Tolkien (2014: 74), the 'oldest and deepest desire' expressed in these narratives is the search for the Great Escape, the escape from Death. From that desire springs the consolation of a happy ending, of the eucatastrophe, hence the redemptive culmination between legend and history in Christ's *Gloria*, in the conquering of death.

The importance of imagination as memory and fantasy is suggested by St. Augustine in chapters 9 and 10 of *On the Trinity*, in the analogy between the triple structure of human mind and the Christian Holy Trinity. The Bishop of Hippo claims that there is Memory (imagination) as the source of our thought by means of the preservation of images perceived by the senses; Intelligence, which, from those images, operates the shaping of the concept and is responsible for the perception of the intelligible (immaterial), expressing it in human language; and Will, the action spurred by the love in human practices and in the concentration, meditation, and focus on the comprehension of reality.

Analogically, the origin of Creation is the Divine Mind, God the Father, while the logical structure of Creation is the Word itself, Logos, God the Son as Wisdom, and the Holy Ghost, which manifests the Divine Will. It is possible to infer from that analogy that Memory (imagination), both in us and in the Trinity, does not have only a preservative function, to retain data, but also, and mostly, generative, by proposing new forms from originality (fantasy), whether from God the Father himself in Creation, or in the human mind, as the source of previously unseen forms sub-created by the artist as a contribution for the beauty of the world.

To find the supernatural, that which is beyond nature and death, is the great effort of mythical imagination. Even if the essential face of the fairy-stories is the Magical towards Nature, by contrasting poetic fabulations with logical and

metaphysical speculations, humanity refines the search for mystery, finding in fantasy an ally that helps one go beyond what senses are unable to reach, and feed what cold reasoning kills by starvation. Tolkien plays with that in a footnote (2014: 32), claiming that Elves may even be a particular way for Man to see the Truth, with capital T (the only occurrence in the text), but because of that, they indicate this transcendence inherent to nature as the contemplative way to reach the supernatural. By superlatively looking at nature, the essence (*eidos*) of fairy-stories, we amplify our perspective, we reflect upon the limits of our senses and then direct our reason to that which escapes our own finiteness.

Therefore, one of Tolkien's (2014: 32) definitions of *Faërie* is "the realm or state in which fairies have their being." The discussion about being is one of Aristotle's conceptions of philosophy, the science that studies being as being, what the realist tradition names metaphysics or ontology. In a platonic sense, we can infer that this *realm* in which fairies exist is the intermediary world of Virtuality where possible beings exist between the reality perceived by senses and the Realm of Forms. In an Aristotelian sense, we can identify the *state* in which fairies have their being as the imaginary formed by the images of individual substances received through the perception of the senses, through which the active intellect abstracts the universal form of things, enabling their recombination into fantastic beings.

In the *Summa Theologica* (I, q.15), Thomas Aquinas agrees with Augustine that the Platonic Realm of Forms resides in the divine intellect. In the same question, he claims that God knows everything, even if virtually, including the things that do not, have not, and will not exist. Therefore, it is legitimate to suppose that Elfland and its inhabitants are potentialities in the Divine Mind, waiting for some unwary traveler to realize them by means of language, through the magic of mythmaking.

FINAL REMARKS

In the last chapter of *The Republic* (10, 599c–608b), Plato resumes his well-known criticism of the poets, holding that they lie when they describe the nature of men and gods, being, at most, third class imitators (the idea itself, the material thing, and the poetic image). His criticism has to do with the relation between art and the criteria to investigate truth, which is further resumed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the connection between the poetic art and the intellectual virtues. Plato concludes the subject acknowledging the debt philosophy owes to myth—just as Aristotle

approaches the *philomythus* and the philosopher—and offers the poets the opportunity to present arguments to rebuke his thesis concerning the falsehood and harmfulness of mythmaking (*mythopoeia*), because he acknowledges the fascination that the art of imagination has over humanity:

> Well, since we've brought up the subject of poetry again, let our defence be this. Since that is what she is like, it was not unreasonable for us to banish her from our city. Reason demanded it. And let us say to her if she looks like accusing us of being harsh or uncultured, that there is a long-standing antagonism between poetry and philosophy. […] And if, despite this, imitation, the poetry which is for pleasure, has any argument to show that she should be included in a well-governed city, let our reply be that left to ourselves we would gladly allow her back. We know how beguiling we ourselves find her. But it is wrong to abandon what we believe to be true. Don't you find that as well, my friend? Don't you find her beguiling especially when it is through Homer that you behold her? (Plato 2000: 329)

The initial investigation of sub-creation as *mythopoeia*, taken as a poetic art (*téchné* and *poiesis*), refers to the platonic paradigms according to the realist tradition. However, in Tolkien's works, such a perspective is associated to the Christian analogy of Creator and Creation, according to its productive activity in Augustine's memory-imagination, in *On the Trinity*, establishing a Creative-sub-creative bond between Divine and human imagination. On the other hand, the perspective of this very mythmaking echoes the Aristotelian and Thomist epistemology and gnoseology with the unity of intellectual virtues, practical or speculative, expressed in the sub-creator's need to comply with the inner consistency of reality, finding the forms of substances and universals in the particular beings themselves, considering the literary work of art, including fairy-stories, as carrying within them such forms to be contemplated.

In this theoretical reflection about the realist philosophical tradition we find the connection between philosophy and myth, emphasizing the concept of natural and supernatural as explicated by the medieval scholasticism, recovering the relevance of imagination and fantasy as a *mimesis* that not only reflects reality, but is able to creatively contribute to it, rescuing the capacity to marvel with what is real, including in intelligible dimensions, especially because of the strangeness provoked by fantastic forms. From this perspective, the eucatastrophe, the sudden turn

to Goodness and Beauty, is not a mere literary resource provided by fairy-stories, but also, analogically, a metaphysical affirmation confessing the adherence to a Divine Providence and to the Christian faith in resurrection and in the redemption of humanity.

We conclude this article by affirming that *On Fairy-stories* is a response to Plato. Just like the gospels are a response to the *eucatastrophic* desire of fairy-stories, and as Christ, as *Logos*, is an answer to the investigations of pagan philosophers, Tolkien attempts to purify and integrate fantasy to the realist tradition, even if in the modest and everyday context of fairy-stories. Although it may be a delusion by which the human mind is deceived by idolatry (Tolkien 2014: 65-66), fantasy can be a means to exercise the intellectual virtue of art and a way for the human mind to seek transcendence through the images offered by Creation (Tolkien 2014: 78-79). Tolkien meditated upon the relationship between his fields of study as an academic, philologist, and writer, between his art and his Christian faith, and devised a speculation that maintains a dialogue with millennia of cultural heritage, from Semitic and Biblical matrices to the discussions on comparative philology and folklore, informed by the scholastic worldview which was resumed in the religious education in his time.

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