

Meddling in the Mind of Melkor: *The Silmarillion* and the Nature of Sin

Introduction

C.S. Lewis was right—we all need literary windows onto the world, and we need to leave the doors of our minds open.¹ Trapped in a windowless room by ourselves, we fall into the slough of solipsism and fail to see the world aright. This is one of the implications of our being made in the image of the Trinity. “When God created us, he intended our minds to be open rooms in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell” (Poythress, *Inerrancy* 134).

Words construct the hallways that link minds to each other. We are led to commune with the Trinity and access a piece of the mind of God by reading his words in Scripture, for God is always present with his words. In a similar way, we commune with human authors—entering the rooms of their mind—since they are always present with their words.² Here we meet a joint truth. We are meant for communion, and it seems that written language holds pride of place in bringing this about. Traveling to other rooms (i.e., the minds of others) by walking the hallways of words is thus inherent in human nature,³ so we should not be surprised to find that literature serves as an integral and complementary perspective on theology.⁴ Literature deepens our understanding of theology—the study of God and his world—by offering fresh perspectives on established truths.

A case in point is Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* and the theological concept of autonomy. Any theologian bold enough to brave the text of Tolkien’s mythology will emerge not just with a greater appreciation for the cosmological and epic history that stands behind Middle-earth, but with a deeper understanding of the nature of sin as the deadly desideratum for self-government and the attendant thirst for tyranny. For theologians, meddling in the mind of Melkor, the chief antagonist of Tolkien’s masterpiece, can shed new light on the long denounced theological blunder of autonomy. In the following pages, I hope to show why Melkor’s behavior in *The Silmarillion* encapsulates autonomy and is in clear contrast to the self-communing behavior of the Trinitarian God of Scripture. To show this, we will also need to briefly discuss the concept of *perichoresis* and the nature of reality as linguistic and relational, the latter of which has strong ties to Tolkien’s own high view of language.

Melkor, Autonomy, and Disunion

The Silmarillion opens with the music and ensuing vision given to the Ainur, the offspring of Ilúvatar, the principal sovereign in Tolkien’s fictional cosmology.⁵ In an act of creaturely devoir, they compose the themes that

Ilúvatar has given to them, producing a music deep and portentous.

But then something changes. Melkor, the most powerful of the Ainur, introduces discord into the singularity of the song because he has grown impatient with the lack of actualized creation. The song, at this point, had not yet created the realm of Arda, but only anticipated its beauty. In this flawless and prophetic song, Ilúvatar sat content,

But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself. To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and he had a share in all the gifts of his brethren. He had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Ilúvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness. Yet he found not the Fire, for it is with Ilúvatar. But being alone he had begun to conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren. (4)

For many theologically-minded readers, several phrases expressing autonomy immediately jump into the foreground: *of his own, to himself, and alone*. Melkor is not merely flirting with independence; he is courting autonomy. “Rather than singing Ilúvatar’s song at the creation of Arda, he desired to create on his own and become a god himself. His pride proved his undoing” (Birzer 93). Like Lucifer, Melkor reminds us that “pride goeth before the fall, and the desire to be something more than God, or what God intended, can corrupt even the best being” (95).⁶

When paired with his desire for “the Flame Imperishable”—something that is only “with Ilúvatar”—Melkor’s actions take on more weight than a flurry of impatience.⁷ And so, as one author put it, the opening narrative suggests that “to be alone is to become corrupted by solitude” (Elam 74).

Witnessing the alien discord in the song, Ilúvatar responds with a new theme to quell the sedition of Melkor, and a cosmic battle ensues between the warring melodies.

The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice. (4–5)

The discordant theme of Melkor wanes as Ilúvatar's theme waxes, the vanity of the former's music testifying to its ill-favored origin. Its power was not in its harmonic beauty, but in its disruptive violence. What's more, Melkor's power is parasitic on the power of Ilúvatar. And here we see the influence of Augustine's concept of evil on Tolkien. It was Augustine who "argued essentially for the Platonic view that sin is not a substance but a negative" (Lobdell 614; Houghton 43).⁸ Even Melkor's evil relies on Ilúvatar's benevolent power.

Melkor's actions thus merit divine judgment. Ilúvatar announces that anyone who attempts to alter the music in opposition to him "shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined" (Tolkien 5). Addressing Melkor directly, he says, "And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (5). In other words, there is nothing that Melkor can create that is not derivative of or subservient to the creative power of Ilúvatar. In Tolkien's world, "the attempts of Evil to create . . . result in the perverted mockery of Ilúvatar's creation" (Birzer 93). He can never truly create; he can only corrupt, and even this corruption will be used by Ilúvatar to serve his greater glory (Houghton 43). This truth bore a hole in Melkor's heart.⁹

Thereafter Melkor seemed to be ruled by the selfsame tyranny that he sought to wield at creation. Such tyranny develops into a significant theme in the rest of the work, and in Tolkien's corpus elsewhere (Irving 8). When he saw the portends of Elves and Men in the vision Ilúvatar provides, he longed not to engage with them in communion—as might be felicitous for a creature made to function in communion with others—but to subdue them, "envying the gifts with which Ilúvatar promised to endow them; and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over their wills" (Tolkien 6). When the realm of Arda was finally actualized, he tried to claim it for himself (9), and "spent his spirit in envy and hate, until at last he could make nothing save in mockery of the thought of others, and all their works he destroyed if he could" (15). He used language, a medium closely linked to the creative song of Ilúvatar, to spread lies and breed distrust among the creatures of Middle-earth (Birzer 90). And so Melkor the maker became Melkor the destroyer.¹⁰ The nascent autonomous will that emerged with creation grew into a hideous and unquenchable desire for lordship, for control. Within the realm of Arda, whatever he could not subdue, he despised.

Melkor's love for autonomy is complemented by his love of darkness, for darkness conceals those who wish to remove themselves from community. In rebelling against the Valar (the other Ainur who took an embodied form in Arda) and the extended rule of Ilúvatar, he attacked the lights of his own realm—first the lights of Illuin and Ormal, the mighty lamps of Middle-earth

(Tolkien 24), and then Telperion and Laurelin, the silver and gold trees of Valinor (68).¹¹ He does so under a heavy cloak of darkness, spun by his evil ally, Ungoliant. Tolkien's haunting description of the giant spider tells us that she lived in a ravine, "weaving her black webs in a cleft of the mountains. There she sucked up all light that she could find, and spun it forth again in dark nets of strangling gloom, until no light more could come to her abode" (66). The epitome of evil: spinning light into darkness. Such is the company of a hater of light and servile harmony.

Seeking to spread his destructive will for autonomy to the race of the Elves, particularly the line of the Noldor, Melkor "kindled their hearts with strife," using "lies and evil whisperings" (61). He desired above all "to sow fear and disunion among the Eldar" (109). We can see at this point that disunion runs in Melkor's blood. From the very beginning, he has longed not for what unites but for what separates.

Throughout much of the rest of the tale, Melkor, renamed Morgoth by the Noldorian elves, lives beneath the earth in his fiery fortress of Angband, peddling off his power to lesser creatures, dwindling and dimming into the antithesis of the Flame Imperishable he so fiercely desired. His will to govern all things made him, as Ilúvatar had promised, little more than a tributary to the glorious communion of races that would arise, at the cost of much blood, in the saga of Middle-earth. Autonomy, exemplified in Melkor, reduces to nothing. His disunion belittles him. Fleeing from his creaturely dependence on Ilúvatar and the community of the Ainur led not to greater power, but to lesser. In short, Melkor's behavior clearly embodies autonomy in a way that strikingly reflects the behavior of the serpent and Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

Theology, Autonomy, and Disunion

Autonomy, then, is a not a problem with which we are unfamiliar. As the deadly desire for self-government, autonomy is center stage in the creation account of Genesis 1–3. There Adam and Eve, not unlike Melkor, fracture the linguistically established harmony between themselves and God. God had communed with his creatures via speech, just as Ilúvatar communed with the Ainur via song. Just as the Ainur were meant to echo the themes of Ilúvatar, so Adam and Eve were meant to use and understand language in conscious submission to God, for "the design plan of language is to serve as the medium of covenantal relations with God, with others, and with the world" (Vanhooser 206). The language that God used with Adam and Eve established a covenantal relationship with them that was saturated with communion. In other words, language by its very nature, is meant to draw persons into relationship, not to separate them from one another. By divine proclivity, language is what we might call *communion behavior*.

Of course, that does not reflect how Adam and Eve use language. They

take the words of the Serpent *over* the words of God, and, in a paradigmatic act of disunion, break fellowship with him in their desire to govern themselves. Like Melkor, they find the appeal of power too alluring to resist. Like Melkor, they diminish rather than grow. Like Melkor, they choose to dwell in darkness rather than in the light of the Word (John 1:1; 1:4). This is the gravity of autonomy, a concept that was consistently emphasized in the twentieth century by a Dutch Reformed apologist, Cornelius Van Til.

Van Til was perhaps one of the greatest modern proponents of the biblical teaching against autonomy. He was a staunch defender of the sovereignty of God and the dependence of the creature—in all of our faculties and behaviors.

What set humanity under the bar of authority was revelation—the very speech of God, both in the natural world (for God created reality through his speech) and in direct address (Scripture). The sin of humanity is, in essence, a rebellion against that authoritative revelation. In his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til writes, “The sinner seeks to be *autonomous*. He will, therefore, seek to set himself up as a judge over that which presents itself to him as revelation. . . . revelation comes to the sinner with a claim of absolute authority over man. It asks man to submit his thought to it in obedience” (Van Til 225–26). Submission and obedience—not exactly the touchstones of human history.

Returning to the Garden of Eden, we find that Adam and Eve’s behavior is markedly similar to that of Melkor (though not nearly as parallel to it as that of the serpent).¹² In Eden, Eve was approached by the serpent in an act of cunning insurgence. “Did God really say . . . ?” was his question. This was, for Van Til, an outright test of God’s authority. And Eve’s response, as well as Adam’s attendant complicity, is the quintessential act of autonomy, an act that revealed their underlying epistemological assumptions: *what* do they know and *how* do they know it? The simple answer is that they know they are creatures in subservient relationship to a God who speaks and who desires their good. They know this by God’s very speech. The serpent challenges them on both counts. Rather than trust in and submit to the words of her speaking God, Eve gathers the sources and then acts upon the assumption that her choice carries just as much authoritative weight as the revelation that she is, quite literally, standing upon (Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 57–58). It is this first act of autonomy that planted seeds of disunion now rooted in the soil of every human heart.

From these hideous roots grew the ivy of self-sovereignty, which aims to choke out the perennials of communion. And because, in John Owen’s words, nothing could be greater than a “holy and spiritual communion” with the triune God, it is no surprise that “autonomy is over and over regarded as the root of all evil in theology” (Owen 90; Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 364). For this reason,

We can see this spirit of autonomy in all sin. As in Genesis 3, sin assumes autonomy. It assumes that God does not exist, or that he has not given us a personal word. That is true of the sins of individuals, families, and nations. It is true of all types of sin: stealing, adultery, murder, deceit. It is also true of intellectual sin: denying the truth in the face of clear knowledge. (Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God* 16–17)

Autonomy is an act of disunion—of epic proportions. So it is fitting that Tolkien deals with this on a cosmic level. But, aside from our communion with the Trinity, why is autonomy, and its ensuing disunion, so caustic to the fabric of reality? To answer this question, we turn to the Trinity, *perichoresis*, and the nature of reality as linguistic and relational.

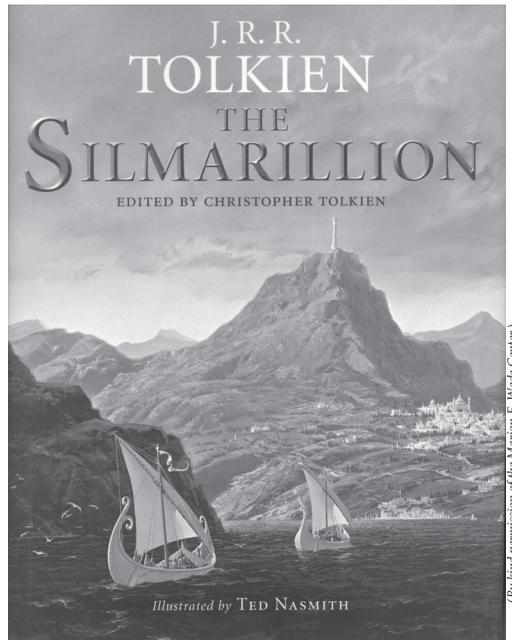
The Harmony and Union of the Trinity

The gravity of autonomy comes not only from the separation between God and his creatures, as fatal as that may be; it comes from its opposition to the harmony and union of the Trinity itself. We find this especially in the ancient doctrine of *perichoresis* (see John 1:32–33; 10:38; 14:10–11; 17:11), the teaching that the persons of the Godhead dwell in communion with one another, such that “each is in each, and all are in each, and all are one” (Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10).

Since we have been looking at the linguistic origins of creation, both in Tolkien’s mythical account and in Genesis 1, we might begin there in understanding how *perichoresis* informs our understanding of the gravity of autonomy.

Closely linked to the creation account of Genesis 1 is the prologue of John’s Gospel. The linguistic analogy introduced in John 1:1—the Son as the Word of the Father—leads us to find support for *perichoresis* in Genesis 1. There is evidence that Tolkien saw this connection as well, in his incorporation of music into the creation account of Arda. It is clear to some that “Tolkien is consciously synthesizing and building on the two biblical accounts of creation, one in Genesis and the other in the gospel according to Saint John” (Flieger 57).

Now, if the Son is the Word of the Father (John 1:1), and if the Spirit of God is bound to the life and effectiveness of that Word (cf. Job 33:4; Rom 8:2), then Genesis 1 is the first time we witness the divine persons’ indwelling one another. At the dawn of creation, the Trinity is present as the divine Speaker, Speech, and Breath.¹³ The Son, as the Speech of God, indwells the Father by expressing the depth of his mind and will. The Spirit, as the power and life of this expression (1 Cor 2:11; Rom 8:9), indwells the Father and the Son in order to apply the expression felicitously to creation. Thus, even in the first divine fiat, “Let there be light,” we have not simply God, but the *triune* God bringing about order and beauty by his perichoretic communion. This



Cover of the 2004 HarperCollins illustrated edition.

is attested to later in Scripture allusively when the psalmist writes, “By the word [Son] of the Lord [Father] the heavens were made, and by the breath [Spirit] of his mouth all their host” (Ps 33:6).¹⁴

Van Til spoke of the doctrine of *perichoresis* in terms of each of the divine persons being “exhaustively representational” of one another (Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* 78). By this he meant that in each person of the Godhead the other two persons are perfectly represented. When we look at the Father, we see the Son and Spirit represented in full. When we look at the Son, we see the Father and the Spirit represented in full. Likewise when we look at the Spirit. The persons of the Trinity coinhere, indwell, interpenetrate, permeate, and make room for one another to such an extent that we cannot help but be dumbfounded at how such unity could exist without eclipsing personal distinctions. And yet in God’s incomprehensibility, somehow this is the case. Exhaustive representation, like the traditional teaching of *perichoresis*, is meant to bring us to our knees in adoration, to bow our hearts and our minds to the God who dwells in intimate self-communion.

This intimate self-communion of the Trinity is deeply rooted in the divine language that the persons of the Godhead exchange: a language of love and glory—and a fitting medium for constructing the fabric of reality. They “speak” to each other in the sense that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love and glorify one another without end (John 3:35; 5:20; 15:9; 17:5).¹⁵ This divine

exchange of love and glory is the highest form of communication and the source of all the harmony we find in creation.

The concept of *perichoresis* and the linguistic nature of the Godhead, then, are divulged in Genesis 1. And because creation is the result of the Triune God's utterance, we might say that all of reality is *linguistic* and *relational*. It is linguistic in the sense that reality is like a word, as it was made through the Word: it can be read (i.e., viewed and experienced), interpreted, artistically re-expressed, believed in, and so on. That reality is in some sense linguistic has been noted by at least a few theologians in the history of the church. Herman Bavinck, for instance, writes,

The whole world is . . . the realization of an idea of God; a book containing letters, large and small, from which his wisdom can be known. . . . The idea of the world that the Father pronounces in the Son is a seminal word (*ratio seminalis*), a fundamental form (*forma principalis*) of the world itself. . . . Thus the world finds its idea, its principle (*arch*), and its final goal (*telos*) in the triune being of God. The word that the Father pronounces in the Son is the full expression of the divine being and therefore also of all that will exist by that word as creature outside the divine being. (425)¹⁶

In other words, reality is linguistic in the sense that it was spoken through the Word, and thus it can be engaged with and is communicative of the one who spoke it: the Trinitarian God himself.

In light of this, reality is also relational.¹⁷ By this we mean that everything in reality is harmoniously related because it was made through the one Word. Every speck and fiber of the world around us is interrelated and can ultimately be traced to the divine purposes of the Trinitarian God who spoke it. And so, amidst the diversity we see around us, there is unity and harmony: there is a vast network of relationships known only by God himself.¹⁸ Reality, as the product of God's speech and as reflective of the self-communing, relational God, is grounded by linguistically established harmony—a harmony of creation that longs to hold uninterrupted communion with the Triune God.

It is this harmony and communion that autonomy opposes. Creatures made in the image of the Trinity are by nature linguistic and relational. Their purpose is to relate to God and to one another so as to brilliantly reflect the communal relations in the Godhead. Taken in this sense, autonomous behavior is invec-tive not just on a creaturely scale, but on a divine scale. A claim to autonomy is an affront to the God who is a community unto himself, for autonomy is essentially an act of *disunion*, the clear antithesis to *communion*.

This is why autonomy is no light matter. This is why Melkor's actions before the dawn of creation are so critical to understand from a theological

perspective. Melkor's clashing theme is not simply libertarian; it is seditious and thoroughly evil *because it is discordant*. The world that Melkor inhabits, not unlike our own, gives primacy to harmonious relationships as established by and sustained in God. Assaulting that harmony with discord is a momentous offense to the God who dwells in self-communion and who has chosen to extend that communion to his creatures.

Admittedly, Ilúvatar is not the Trinitarian, *perichoretic* God of Scripture, though there are, of course, hints of the Trinity insofar as the music of the Ainur resembles the *Logos* of John's Prologue (McIntosh 182), and the "Flame Imperishable" has a striking resemblance to the Holy Spirit, as Gregory Hartley has recently developed. There is also the confession of Tolkien himself in one of his letters that Ilúvatar is a reflection of God the Father (Hartley 96). But these allusions are distant, as was intentional on Tolkien's part. Following Aquinas's natural theology, Tolkien would have assumed that the true, monotheistic God could be found through nature, but the Trinity could only be found through special revelation (i.e., Scripture). Thus, a monotheistic god would fit well in the context of a myth for England, which would foreshadow the Trinitarian God who would later come to light. For this reason, some have rightly described Ilúvatar as a "proto-trinitarian" god.¹⁹ At the very least, we can confidently say that Tolkien's god *could* be trinitarian, but that this would not have been Tolkien's goal. His adherence to Thomistic theology would have him posit *de Deo uno* in nature, not *de Deo trino*. The latter would only come with special revelation (i.e., Scripture), which would follow this mythical account. The mythical account, nonetheless, reveals the truth in part and points ahead to the revealed God of the Bible.

The Essence of Sin, The Essence of Good

More to the point, what we have said thus far indicates that Tolkien's description of Melkor and his accompanying behavior serves as a window on the nature of sin. What is sin, essentially? It is disunion—whether out of hubris or malignance or impatience. Tolkien, through Melkor, shows the destructive power of autonomous behavior in Melkor's breaking communion with the Ainur and rebelling against the theme of his maker; Van Til addresses the same phenomenon in human history in confirming that the desire for self-governance is the root of all sin. Both, however, were able to see that disunion is ruinous.²⁰

Both Tolkien and Van Til were also able to see the futility of autonomy. It might be ruinous, but it is not victorious. Melkor's attempts to compose melodies apart from Ilúvatar would come to nothing. They would, in Ilúvatar's own words, be but a tributary to his own glory. Likewise, human sin, because it is seditious against God's unfailing rule, is futile. Even rebellious thought is futile (Rom 1:21). Sin, as "rebellion against God's Lordship"

(Frame, *Systematic Theology* 4), will never win the day. The ivy of autonomy will wither and die as God prunes the world of evil and one day raises his people from the dead.

As we said earlier, if the essence of sin is disunion, the essence of good is communion. The alliance of Elves and Men, and Elves and Dwarves, subverts Melkor's wish to turn the creatures of Middle-earth against one another. This communion is, to be sure, intermittent—*The Silmarillion* is laced with war and death, both between races and within them. But union emerges, even with divine assistance from the Valar, as the races each keep a watchful eye on the fortress of Angband and the ever present threat of invasion by orcs in the Northern mountains. Perhaps Ilúvatar's promise to Melkor is fulfilled most clearly in this: that evil, in addition to creating discord, ultimately provides grounds for union. Every race would march against the flags of Morgoth rather than turn against one another.

Likewise, from the side of theology, communion with God is the ultimate goal of all creatures, and this is accented by the medium of language itself. We do not have the space required to outline Tolkien's own high view of language, but as any reader of *The Silmarillion* can notice, and as Verlyn Flieger has developed in depth, words lie at the foundation of Tolkien's perception of reality, and their importance and power "cannot be too strongly emphasized" (Flieger 57).²¹ Yet for all Christians, the "central, predominant" purpose of language is "to be a vehicle for personal communication and communion between God and human beings" (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word* 38). Thus, when we hear God's words in Scripture, "we have spiritual communion with him" (28). Though sinful rebellion fractured the original "harmonious communion" (103) that creatures had with God, the redemption of all things—a redemption which comes through *the Word*—will restore harmony. Creation and redemption are inextricably bound up with communion and the divine Word, the *Logos* of God. "It is through the Logos that all things were made; it is also through the Logos, become flesh, that all things in redemption were accomplished" (Vos 63). We were made for communion, and we are redeemed for it. All of life is meant to point us to that end. "Real life, life with meaning, life with joy and growth and fruitfulness, is life in communion with God" (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word* 112).

We have our own Melkor in the pages of Scripture. And his aim is the same: to turn us against each other, just as he tried to turn God against himself in the person of the incarnate Son (Matt 4). But in the Word, the *Logos* of God, we are invited to be one with the Trinity (John 17:20). It is no accident that the Word himself wishes us "to be brought to complete unity" (John 17:23). Unity—communion of persons—is rooted in the very nature of God.

Conclusion

If nothing else, a theological reading of Tolkien, as well as a Tolkienian reading of theology, bears much fruit for the careful reader. And here, it is important that we ask why. What is it that makes literature so effective in communicating theological truth? Perhaps, as Tolkien demonstrated so well, it is the lure of the imagination. In literature, the mind is captured like a trout in the hands of a fisher and then released back into the stream of experience. Imagination, then, is more than an avenue for daydreaming or even a means of telling stories. It is divinely used throughout history to draw people closer to the God of our imaginations, and “when God captures our imagination, he captures the rest of our mind, including our understanding and our will” (Veith Jr. and Ristuccia 18). Each of us is caught up in a literary window, and for those moments we are receptive to ideas we might have thought irrelevant or dull. Literary windows let in light that might otherwise never have dawned in our experience. And it is the extension of experience itself, we should remember, that brings us to read in the first place.

Harold Bloom wrote years ago that “we read deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are” (Bloom 34). Indeed, even fictional literature, such as the epic cosmology of Middle-earth, “can help us explore abstract human experiences...deepen our appreciation for concrete human experience...and [expand] our range of experiences” (Reinke 120–21). We read because we want to expand our view of the world by looking at it through another person’s eyes, and this has the complementary effect of helping us know ourselves in a deeper way. The literary windows we peer into not only extend the breadth of our ability to empathize with other views; they also deepen our self-awareness.

So, we might end where we began, with C.S. Lewis. We demand windows because we have an unquenchable thirst to know ourselves, people, and the world more deeply. But of course, theology itself has the same thirst, with the very important qualification that it foregrounds the Trinitarian God who made us and the world we live in, *by His Word*.

We should not be surprised that literature and theology serve as complementary perspectives on our experience, for both of them are rooted in the linguistic and relational nature of reality. “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) the Father spoke and Spirit heard. Without that holy conversation, we would have no longing for literary windows and we would have no theology. We would have darkness—the room of the mind locked and its windows boarded up.

Just as we only see light in God’s light (Ps 36:9), so we only frame our literary and theological windows because we have no choice, as his image-bearing creatures, but to look *through* the Word at the rest of the world—that

is, we use the medium of language to understand a world that was manifested by that very medium. This, ultimately, is why literature and theology can serve as complementary perspectives on one another. Though we take our dogma from the fruit of theological inquiry, we can and often do find our passion in the stories that reflect that dogma. That is why reading *The Silmarillion* and meddling in the mind of Melkor is more than an exercise in escapism. It is a journey of finding the truth of God's revelation retold in stories that grip the imagination. By peering into the mind of Melkor, we come to understand something of our own selfish desire for autonomy, and can emerge with a greater appreciation for the Trinity and the sacrificial work of Christ, which brings us into fellowship with the God who harmonizes unity and diversity in himself and in the world he created.

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

Notes

¹ "We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. . . . We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. . . . We demand windows." C.S. Lewis, "We Demand Windows," in *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing*, rev. and exp., ed. Leland Ryken (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2002), 51.

² When Adam names the animals in the creation account, for example, his words "express his desires, his thoughts, and his purposes. He intends to name the animals, as an act of his person. . . . So Adam's act of naming expresses his personality. Adam is present in his speech." Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 30. This view of human presence with words runs contrary to the assumptions of Derrida, who viewed the written word as "dead." For Derrida, "writing is dangerous, for it substitutes arbitrary and lifeless signs for the authentic living presence of speech, thus making truth—the match of language and reality—impossible to achieve." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 62. Derrida was long preceded in this view by Plato, who understood written language to be a step removed from personal presence, since it is only a *sign* of presence (Vanhoozer, 54).

³ "We get one chance at this life. We have one body, one mind, and one life to live. Reading provides us with a vicarious experience of others' lives. Literature introduces us to the lives and experiences and thoughts and affections of others, even if those characters are the product of an author's wild imagination. By doing so, literature expands our own experiences and causes us to grow in our sympathy toward others." Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 121.

⁴ On the necessity of perspectives, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987)

and John M. Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 3–18.

⁵It is interesting to note here the linguistic dimension of creation. The Ainur begin singing only because Ilúvatar “spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music” (3). C.S. Lewis reflects this in the end of ch. 8 and the beginning of ch. 9 in *The Magician’s Nephew*. In Tolkien’s account, the sound precedes sight of creation, paralleling the creation narrative of Genesis. However, it is important to remember, as Jonathan McIntosh has shown in his recent dissertation, that the music of the Ainur is potent but not actualizing. It is the vision that leads to and inspires the actualization of creation. The vision also reveals more to the Ainur in showing how Melkor’s evil will be used by Ilúvatar for the latter’s greater purposes. He writes, “One dimension to the Vision’s superiority over the Music is theological or revelatory: although the Music itself had been a means by which the Ainur could grow in their knowledge of Ilúvatar, in the foreknowledge of the Children of Ilúvatar afforded in the Vision, by contrast, the Ainur are able to see ‘the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew, and learned yet a little more of his wisdom, which otherwise had been hidden even from the Ainur’ (S 18). Through the Vision, in short, the Ainur receive a greater revelation of the Creator than what the Music alone had provided.” Jonathan McIntosh, “The Metaphysics of the Music and Vision,” in *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faerie* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Dallas, 2009), 220. This follows the Thomistic route of metaphysics, wherein we find development “from intelligible potency to existing actuality” (227).

⁶James Irving claims that “an order of due submission and reverence is what fundamentally is breached in all the forms of evil of sin in Tolkien’s cosmos.” James Irving, “The Succor of Those Years: Fallen-ness in Tolkien’s Cosmos,” *Crux* 23, no. 3 (September 1987): 8.

⁷Gregory Hartley, along with a few others, has helpfully reminded us that this Flame Imperishable “proceeds from Ilúvatar just at the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son.” This is one of the many marks of Tolkien as an avid believer in the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. See “A Wind from the West: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Tolkien’s Middle-earth,” *Christianity and Literature* 62, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 97.

⁸Hartley, following Houghton, notes that Tolkien also follows Augustine’s view of creation. “Augustine argued that the phrase ‘heaven and earth’ in Gen 1:1 refers to the *actual* creation of all angelic beings in heaven but only to the *potential* for creation of earthly creatures, who appear later as the passage progresses. . . . Tolkien departs from Augustine by having the Ainur, not Ilúvatar, fulfill the potential creation by bringing into reality the Music of Ilúvatar . . .” (99). However, Tolkien also seems to be tied to Thomas Aquinas in his view of creation, especially with regard to God being the source of both actual and potential being. See Yannick F. Imbert, “Covenantal Faërie: A Reformed Evaluation of Tolkien’s Theory of Fantasy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76 (2014): 122.

⁹This hole would come to be filled by a fiery and icy hatred of divinely envisioned union—whether between Elves and the Valar (the Ainur who chose to bind themselves to Arda in an embodied form), or between Elves and Dwarves, or between Elves and men (137–138, 194, 232).

¹⁰It was pointed out to me by Yannick Imbert that this is reminiscent of the making of the Rings, when Celebrimbor is deceived by Sauron and the desire for au-

tonomy passes from Melkor's maiar (Sauron) to another creature.

¹¹ These trees were made by the image-bearing song of Yavanna. As Illúvatar sang the Ainur into being and the rest of creation through the Ainur, so Yavanna "chants" the trees into existence (26).

¹² The serpent was the first creature to use language in order to create discord. As such, he mirrors Melkor more closely than Adam and Eve do.

¹³ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 17–21.

¹⁴ See also Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 19–21.

¹⁵ On "mutual glorification" of the persons in the Godhead, see John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 480–81. See also Francis Cheynell, *The Divine Triunity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (London, 1650), 62.

¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 425. Jonathan Edwards also noted this in comparing the natural world to revelation. "As the system of nature, and the system of revelation, are both divine works, so both are in different senses a divine word. Both are the voice of God to intelligent creatures, a manifestation and declaration of himself to mankind." Jonathan Edwards, "The 'Miscellanies': Number 1340," in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 237.

¹⁷ On the relational nature of reality in John's Gospel, see Maksimilijan Matjaz, "The Significance of the Logos in the Relational Aspect of John's Theology," in "*Perché Stessero Con Lui*": *Scritti in Onore Di Klemens Stock SJ, Nel Suo 75o Compleanno*, ed. Lorenzo De Santos and Santi Grasso (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2010).

¹⁸ This is related to the one-and-many problem, which is far too great a topic to begin discussing here. Suffice it to say that the harmony of unity and diversity in the Trinity is the basis for the harmony of unity and diversity in reality. This is more fully explored in Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 58–59; *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 47–50; and Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 39–43.

¹⁹ "It is also possible to connect further the Creator's music-making at the outset of the *Ainulindalë* with . . . the proto-Trinitarianism of Tolkien's mythical theology. . . Linking the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity with the *musical universalis* tradition behind the *Ainulindalë*, Hart has suggested that the 'complexity or distinction' of the Christian godhead means that, behind the cosmic music played out in the world by the Creature is the prior divine music which *is* the Creator." McIntosh, "The Flame Imperishable," 216. See also David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 276.

²⁰ As Elam notes, "Ilúvatar does what he is not obligated to do, allow evil to express itself as it will, so that in the end, he might show that it is nothing even in the fullness of its expression. It sets the value of self-interest, self-centeredness, at naught, and sets the value of hope above aught else" (76).

²¹ On the influence of Owen Barfield's theory of language on Tolkien, see Flieger,

Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 39–87; Yannick Imbert, “‘Who Invented the Stories Anyway?’ A Reformed Perspective on Tolkien's Theory of Fantasy” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2010), 59–91.

Works Cited

- Augustine. *De Trinitate*, Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/5, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012.
- Birzer, Bradley J. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth*. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003.
- Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- Elam, Michael David. “The *Ainulindalë* and J.R.R. Tolkien's Beautiful Sorrow in Christian Tradition.” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*. 28 (2011): 61–78.
- Flieger, Verlyn. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983.
- Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1989.
- . *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010.
- . *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013.
- Hartley, Gregory. “A Wind from the West: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Tolkien's Middle-earth.” *Christianity and Literature* 62, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 95–120.
- Houghton, John Wm. “Augustine of Hippo.” *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, edited by Michael D.C. Drout, Routledge, 2007, 43.
- Imbert, Yannick. “Covenantal Faërie: a Reformed Evaluation of Tolkien's Theory of Fantasy.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 119–141.
- . “‘Who Invented the Stories Anyway?’ A Reformed Perspective on Tolkien's Theory of Fantasy.” PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2010.
- Irving, James. “The Succor of Those Years: Fallen-ness in Tolkien's Cosmos.” *Crux* 23, no. 3 (September 1987): 7–9.
- Lobdell, Jared. “Sin.” *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, edited by Michael D.C. Drout, Routledge, 2007, 613–614.
- McIntosh, Jonathan. “The Metaphysics of the Music and Vision.” *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faerie*. Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Dallas, 2009.
- Nagy, Gergely. “The *Silmarillion*.” In *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, edited by Michael D.C. Drout, 608–611. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Owen, John. *Communion with the Triune God*. Edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007.
- Poythress, Vern S. *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.
- . *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Reinke, Tony. 2011. *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Ted Nasmith. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998.
- Van Til, Cornelius. *Defense of the Faith*. 4th ed. Edited by K. Scott Oliphint. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008.
- . *In Defense of the Faith*. Vol. 2, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969.
- . *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*. 2nd ed. Edited by William Edgar. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007.
- Veith Jr., Gene Edward, and Matthew P. Ristuccia. 2015. *Imagination Redeemed: Glorifying God with a Neglected Part of Your Mind*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Vos, Geerhardus. "The Range of the Logos Title in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel." *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., P&R, 1980, 59–90.