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At the Root of the Tree of Tales:
Using Comparative Myth and "On Fairy-Stories" to Analyze Tolkien's Cosmogony

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Tolkien first penned the cosmogonical myth *The Music of the Ainur* sometime between 1918 and 1920, making it one of his oldest writings related to Middle-earth. But what sets *The Music of the Ainur* apart as a notable early work is how little it changed compared to the other contemporaneous writings that established his secondary world of Middle-earth. Tolkien's earliest stories teemed with details verging on the fanciful, where the gods of death still dwelt in halls roofed with bat wings, and a Prince of Cats held all lesser cats in thrall. In 1926, Tolkien cut these tales down to the bare bone in his *Sketch of the Mythology*, excising much of this florid detail in favor of rebuilding the stories in a much more somber style, with the emphasis falling on the doomed and desperate "Northern courage" exerted by the early heroes among both Elves and Men (Tolkien, *Beowulf* 262-263). It is this world that would give rise first to *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings,* and of course the posthumously published *Silmarillion*.

Yet, as Christopher Tolkien notes in his commentary on *The Music of the Ainur,* alone of Tolkien's stories, the creation story remained mostly unchanged (Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales I* 60). The key concepts, main storyline, and style remain constant, thus showing that the cosmogony of Arda was in place from his earliest to his latest versions of the myths of Middle-earth. This constancy establishes it as an important text in understanding the myths and tales of Middle-earth that Tolkien produced across his lifetime. Analyzing the evolution of *The Music of the Ainur,* Trevor Hart notes that the primary change Tolkien introduced was more firmly delineating the differences in roles between Eru and the Ainur, between creation and subcreation (50-51). When considering the *Ainulindalë* as a creation myth, this becomes of especial significance.

Nearly all world myth cycles contain a cosmogonical myth, and Tolkien's is no exception. In his 1947 essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien acknowledges the exploration of similarities and possible connections between the myths and stories of our real world as a "perfectly legitimate procedure in itself," while simultaneously cautioning those undertaking a search for broad patterns in the forest not lose sight of the individual trees: the stories themselves in their most essential role as stories (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 106). In an era where scholarship sought similarities between myths, Tolkien asserted that the *differences* could be just as intriguing, writing in "On Fairy-Stories" that, "It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count" (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 106). This particular approach to studying Tolkien's cosmogony proves fruitful. Much scholarly work has been done on the cosmogonies of world mythology, yet examining the *Ainulindalë* within this context shows that it fits poorly with its cosmogonical brethren, inviting the reader to consider instead those "unclassifiable individual details" that distinguish the *Ainulindalë* from other creation stories. "On Fairy-Stories" provides the reason for this difference by establishing the theory of subcreation as the most essential underpinning of the *Ainulindalë,* a theory that justifies and elevates Tolkien's own creative work.

The Tree of Tales: Creation Myths of the World

"In a sense, myths are self-fulfilling prophecies," writes Barbara C. Sproul in *Primal Myths: Creating the World*: "they create facts out of the values they propound" (3). Through a culture's creation story, we can discover not only that culture's core values but also its most basic existential understandings, which are then impressed upon other myths and stories, an idea that manifests in Tolkien's Middle-earth stories, which unfold themes first expressed in the *Ainulindalë.*

In style, the *Ainulindalë* reads every bit as a creation story, but in terms of motifs shared with other world creation myths, the incongruities overwhelm the similarities. In his 1963 book *Alpha: The Myths of Creation,* religion scholar Charles H. Long proposed five categories into which creation myths can be classified: creation from nothing, creation from chaos, world-parent myths, emergence myths, and earth-diver myths. The first three types appear in myths with which we know Tolkien to have been familiar: the mythologies of Western Europe, those of the Abrahamic tradition, and the ancient literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Therefore, Tolkien did not lack cosmogonical models when developing the creation myth for his secondary world, yet the *Ainulindalë* fits uneasily into Long's taxonomy, touching only lightly upon the most common cosmogonical archetypes, including those elements used in the creation stories with which Tolkien was familiar. Critics have certainly sought connections between the *Ainulindalë* and specific creation myths with which Tolkien was known to have been familiar. John Gough sought correspondence between the *Ainulindalë* and the creation

myth of the Norse cycle beloved to Tolkien and came to the unmitigated conclusion that, "The Norse creation myth and Tolkien's clearly share no common ground" (7). Other critics have identified the Hebraic Genesis as a source, with one critic concluding that the *Ainulindalë* is "derivative, having biblical origins and Eddic roots" (Davis 6). Certainly, there are motifs shared between the Bible and the *Ainulindalë,* but again, the differences overwhelm the similarities: the use of subcreators in the *Ainulindalë,* the differing times and modes of entry of evil into the world, and the relative remove of Tolkien's Eru from the world compared to the biblical God. Most critics conclude that the biblical connections are minimal (Flieger, *Splintered Light* 273 ; Cox 57; Gough 3). The remaining and overwhelming majority of the *Ainulindalë* lacks precedent among world creation mythology.

The *Ainulindalë* begins with creation from nothing: "There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made" (3). And that's it. After that single opening sentence, emphasis shifts from Eru's creative role to the subcreative roles of the Ainur, until Eru is required to engender that imagined world with actual existence with his utterance of, "*Eä!* Let these things Be!"Let's look first at the similarities between the *Ainulindalë* and other creation-from-nothing myths.

Eru creates the Ainur from a thought and then makes their envisioned universe manifest with a word. In his encyclopedia *Creation Myths of the World,* David Adams Leeming classifies creation stories not just using Long's five-part taxonomy but also on the basis of frequent motifs that arise in cosmogonical stories. Both creation from thought and creation from words are common subtypes within the creation-from-nothing taxon (8). Leeming writes, "Of all the explanations of the beginning of creation, the concept of creation by thought perhaps makes the most sense to human beings … because we all initiate creative acts primarily by thought" (354). Likewise, he notes that the human ability to use language makes word-based creation a common subtype among world creation myths (362).

These similarities tether the *Ainulindalë* to the genre of creation stories in several important ways. First, it is important to recall that Tolkien insisted on the originality of his invented mythology and responded with exasperation to readers who treated his stories as pastiches of world myths and sought to find the sources of his work. "These tales are 'new'," he wrote in 1951 to Milton Waldman, "they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements" (*Letters* 147). In 1972, echoing "On Fairy-Stories," he wrote to a Mr. Wrigley that, "To my mind it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider" (418).

So again taking Tolkien's advice to heart as far as how to proceed, why did he choose to form these particular connections between creation stories of the creation-from-nothing type

and his *Ainulindalë*? I believe there are two important reasons. Firstly, the elements he chose to include in the *Ainulindalë* are common throughout world myth, as attested by Leeming's study. The vast majority of readers will likely recognize most of them, making the *Ainulindalë* "feel real" as a creation myth and, upon this realistic backdrop, allowing Tolkien's more original elements to stand out in stark relief. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, these similarities accord not only with the creation-from-nothing type generally but, specifically, with the biblical creation story, cleverly allowing Tolkien to employ a paganistic pantheon similar to those of his beloved Germanic and Finnish myth cycles without contradicting his own Catholic beliefs about the origins of the universe. Especially creation from word or *logos,* present in both the *Ainulindalë* and in the Gospel of John, allows Eru enough correspondence with the Christian God to allow Tolkien to excuse his mythology as "a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety," as he did in his letter to Peter Hastings (Tolkien, *Letters* 188). Tolkien states as much to Milton Waldman, allowing that his appointing the Ainur as lesser powers beneath a single god "can yet be accepted – well, shall we say baldly, by a mind that believes in the Blessed Trinity" (*Letters* 146).

Yet the bulk of the *Ainulindalë* has no grounding in existing creation myths, with two major differences fairly unique. First is the relative attention paid to the act of subcreation by the Ainur versus actual creation by Eru. Second is the use of music—not thought or spoken word, not a tangible handicraft—as the means by which that subcreation is effected. In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien presents the metaphor of a cauldron containing the sum total of story elements used throughout the world, asserting that "the Cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly" (113). Just as Tolkien selected enough details to make the *Ainulindalë* feel "real," he also dipped the ladle to present elements that stand apart from the rest of world creation stories.

Subcreation: The Root of the Tree of Tales

"On Fairy-Stories" was first presented at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland in 1939 and was revised and published in a memorial volume for Charles Williams in 1947. The essay introduces Tolkien's theories on the fantasy genre. Perhaps the most important concept introduced in "On Fairy-Stories" is that of subcreation: the use of art to make a secondary world with enough "inner consistency of reality" that a reader or listener can imaginatively enter into that world (123). For Tolkien, subcreation had a religious dimension as well: As a devout Catholic and believing humankind to be created in the image of God, he saw the human drive to subcreate as originating from the divine model. In the poem *Mythopoeia,* quoted in "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien concludes succinctly, "we make still by the law in which we're made" (127).

Tolkien himself acknowledges at several points in his *Letters* that the formation of Arda by the Ainur is an act of subcreation (193-5, 235, 284). Certainly, the creation of the universe, earth, or humankind through an artistic process is not wholly alien to world creation myths.

Leeming identifies the creator-as-artist as a subtype within the creation-from-chaos taxon. The artist, presented with the raw and chaotic stuff of the universe as artistic materials, arranges the primeval substance so as to establish order and meaning. Leeming writes, "To keep chaos ordered we need to constantly experience it in new ways. The artist and we become analogous to the creator god or gods who chose to make order out of the primeval chaos" (15). Leeming in essence describes the concept of subcreation.

None of the myth cycles with which Tolkien was known to have been familiar utilize the creator-as-artist motif. This aspect appears most often in Native American mythologies (Leeming 319-321). Furthermore, the *Ainulindalë* deviates sharply from this motif in terms of the type of art employed. Leeming describes the creator-as-artist subtype as representing the world made through human *craft,* such as pottery, tent-building, or sculpture (319). Yet although some of them assume that role eventually, the Ainur are *not* initially craftsmen—they are singers—and world creation myths involving creation from song are rare and, again, largely confined to the Americas (Leeming 351).

Tolkien's use of this unfamiliar element in the *Ainulindalë,* however, is significant. According to Leeming:

> The fact that the creator is a tent builder or potter or sculptor makes him one of us, and that in turn makes what we do sacred and significant. The *deus faber* creation is a celebration of human ingenuity and a justification for what we do. And it turns what we do into something mystical and magical. It makes our crafts microcosmic representations of creation itself. (321)

As a philologist and a storyteller, Tolkien sought to justify those arts in which language had the power to bridge the imagined and the real. Eru's first act is to create singers, who actualize Eru's abstract thoughts into a vision that begins as a secondary world before being endowed by Eru with the Flame Imperishable and becoming a primary world. Here, the contrast between the relatively little time spent discussing creation by Eru as compared to subcreation by the Ainur becomes important. In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien writes, "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft" (124). Eru's creation of the world is instantaneous and effortless, commanding only a few sentences of the *Ainulindalë*. The act of subcreation by the Ainur, in contrast, is one requiring the "labour and thought, and … special skill" that Tolkien identified. Understandably, the subcreative efforts of the Ainur receive the bulk of attention in the story (124).

The work of a wordsmith—whether a poet, songwriter, or storyteller—can be tedious work, and work that certainly requires a special skill. Tolkien's *Letters* reveal his hopeful assertions of having *The Lord of the Rings* completed by the late 1940s, but that promise was

followed by a decade of setbacks, illness, family crises, professional obligations, uprooting, and of course, the second World War. Throughout this tumultuous time, as Tolkien became increasingly mindful that what began as a mere sequel to *The Hobbit* was burgeoning beyond anything he ever anticipated in terms of time, labor, or page count, one cannot help but to remember the dismay felt by the Ainur as they first arrived in the world Eru made for them: "But when the Valar entered into Eä they were at first astounded and at a loss, for it was as if naught was yet made which they had seen in vision, and all was but on point to begin and yet unshaped, and it was dark" (10).

The *Ainulindalë,* therefore, invests song, poetry, and story with a special—even sacred—significance. It presents the secondary world as originating through a process that parallels the genesis of many of Tolkien's own written works, especially his most important, such as *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It also parallels the creative achievements of the cultures that preoccupied Tolkien both professionally and imaginatively: the Anglo-Saxons, the Norse, the Finnish, and the Celts, societies whose literary achievements are but rare extant manifestations of a rich oral storytelling tradition long-lost to mortal ears. In many of these societies, eulogy conferred legitimacy to a ruler, a dynasty, or a remembered event, and people of all professions and classes utilized poetry as a means to memorialize witnessed events (Opland 207). For this reason, Anglo-Saxon kings named their heirs so as to alliterate with the names of their ancestors, which made it easier to preserve that name in song (Stenton 53).

In other words, the very fabrics of these cultures were shaped by the spoken word in a way that it is difficult for us to imagine, steeped as we are a text-dominated culture. The cultures of Middle-earth display similar predilections: The Elves, Tolkien wrote, "did not depend on perishable records, being stored in the vast houses of their minds" and Middle-earth's people have an oral tradition discernible from the songs and poems published in Tolkien's writings, especially *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, *Peoples of Middle-earth* 342; Flieger, *Interrupted Music* 64). This oral tradition carries with it remnants of the power of the original creation, accomplished in the same manner of song (Provost 50). It seems no coincidence that the Ainur sing the creation of the world much in the manner of the scops of old and only see the barest threads of this vast story put into writing, much as the surviving Germanic, Finnish, and Celtic tales give the sense of having grasped at a vast sea of myth and story and come up with only a palm's worth to store apart from the eroding forces of time.

Conclusion: Authors of a Universe

"In his reference to the Valar as 'sub-creators,'" writes Debbie Sly, "Tolkien is possibly making a fairly grandiose claim for his genre" (117). Indeed, in light of Tolkien's theory of subcreation and the *Ainulindalë,* one cannot help but to think of Tolkien alongside his Ainur as authors of a universe. Indeed, my chief contention with Sly's observation is her use of the word *grandiose*: Tolkien's understanding of his subcreative role as on par with that of the Ainur is not

grandiose; it is what he did, with the allowance that he neither possessed the supernatural skills nor the eternal lifespan of his Ainur.

Within his capabilities as a mere mortal, Tolkien authored a universe. Myth cycles begin with a creation story, and Tolkien's is no exception. His cosmogonical myth was one of the first he wrote and remained the polestar amid a collection of myths that underwent drastic changes as they evolved, as myths will do, as the maturation of the author stood in for the slow evolution of a culture across eras. Just like the Ainur, Tolkien eventually found that the world he had labored to bring into being and worked upon with great pleasure had taken on its own impetus and lived at least somewhat beyond his control. If cosmogonical myths impress their core ideas upon all the myths that follow, then Tolkien's creation story did just that, as subcreation became a central theme in his created world and in his own life.

For Middle-earth, its cultures, and its history have long achieved the inertia of a real mythology that lives independently of the voice that first made it real. Just as the greatest myth cycles inspire further subcreation in the form of transformative interpretations and retellings, the fans and successors of Tolkien's work have invested it with the life of a true mythic tradition, sometimes letting an overlooked element of the myth shine forth—Tolkien's theory of recovery from "On Fairy-Stories"—and sometimes corrupting and diminishing. Tolkien certainly seems to have felt ambivalence toward this possibility, writing in 1972 that, "Being a cult figure in one's own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant," even as he expresses the wish to "leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (Tolkien, *Letters* 418, 145). To return to the "grandiose" claim of the Ainur representing Tolkien's own role, Tolkien felt an absence of myth in the modern world, and his song—like that of the Ainur—provisioned that void with the stories that would become a mythology for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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