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Book review of: *J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts* edited by Melody Green and Ned Bustard

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difficulty recognizing as "orthodox." Yet Freeman goes on to affirm that Tolkien's view of God's non-determinative foreknowledge is essentially the Molinist "middle knowledge" position (74), a position generally accepted as an orthodox option among Protestants. What are we to make of this? Does Freeman's apparent difficulty reflect his own theological perspective, or could he be employing the dialectics of question and answer as an apologist for Tolkien, with one eye toward Protestant readers like himself?

Whatever the answer, if these are faults they are happy ones, for the result of Freeman's interrogation is generally to the benefit of the reader. By penetrating more deeply into areas of theological ambiguity in Tolkien, Freeman offers a deeper and clearer understanding of Tolkien's own theology, and for that we can be grateful.

More positively speaking, Freeman provides generally excellent close treatments of all of Tolkien's views, but several stand out: His treatment of nature, sub-creation, and art (84-95) is profound and moving. His discussion of the Fall, evil, and sin (156-212) is an excellent introduction to a classical understanding of good and evil, virtue and vice, through a Tolkienian lens. And his chapter on the Christian life (286-308) offers a multifaceted consideration of Christian spiritual formation and ethics. In and through the entire work, Freeman's presentation of Tolkien's views demonstrates that the Professor can indeed be considered a theologian in his own right.

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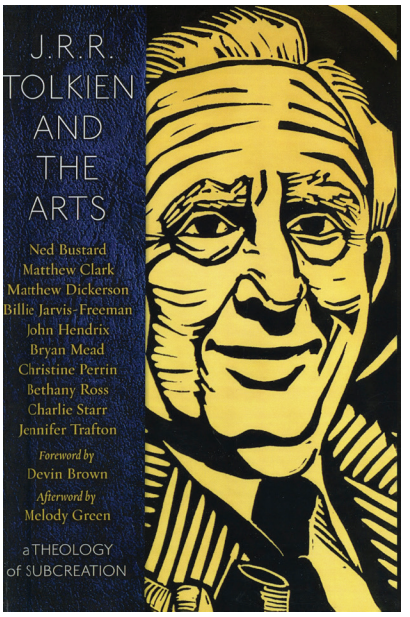
***J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts*, edited by Melody Green and Ned Bustard. Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2021.**

Upon reading the title and the brief foreword by Devin Brown, I made two assumptions about *J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts*. The first was that I was about to read a book that was narrow in scope—that the topics would be limited to those related to artistic creation *within* Tolkien's created worlds (e.g., the meaning of



Elven music), as well as discussions of the role of visual art in Tolkien's works. The second assumption was that the approach would be strictly scholarly.

Both these assumptions were wrong. It became apparent from the first essays, which discuss Tolkien's understanding of myth and his theology of the imagination, that the scope of the book actually encompasses all of aesthetics and literary theory. The "arts" in the title has been interpreted broadly, and therefore includes all literary topics, because literature itself is an art. Papers that are *off* limits for this collection, then, would be any approach that sidelined all consideration of literary elements—purely theological, ecological, or philological angles, for example.

As for my expectations of a primarily scholarly book, these were upset (for the most part happily so) by a mere turn to read the contributor biographies in the back of the book. While the essayists do include two or three established Inklings scholars, the remaining contributors are as diverse as the essay topics. We have a children's author, two emerging scholars, two illustrators, a poet, and a singer/songwriter. While three or four of the essays read as short—usually between 8 and 15 pages—scholarly dives, the rest require other classification. Two might be considered erudite personal essays, and two or three are artists' meditations: a poet writing on Tolkien's poetry, an artist on his art, and so on.

The variety is the book's strength. John Hendrix's "The Glyphic Tolkien," for example, delivers a highly original and off-kilter take on Tolkien's preferences in fantasy illustration, which I am sure could *only* come from another fantasy illustrator (Hendrix is a *New York Times* bestselling illustrator of several works, ranging from fantasy to historical fiction). Hendrix applies categories of contemporary illustration to Tolkien's aesthetic preferences as revealed primarily in his personal correspondence. He convincingly demonstrates how much of Tolkien's famed grumpiness concerning his book's illustrations arose from a deep-seated preference for the "glyphic," an aesthetic mode that, in D.B. Dowd's words, "fuses the descriptive and the symbolic," rather than prioritizing realism (qtd. in Hendrix 137). Overcommitment to rendering the make-believe in a believable manner might supplant the reader's (for Tolkien, *sacred*) imaginative task of dreaming up the images themselves.

Another unexpected delight is Christine Perrin's elegant meditation on Tolkien's poetry, "Root and Branch: Tolkien the Poet." A poet herself, Perrin brings a keen awareness of subtle aspects of language to some of the central poems *within* Tolkien's myth. For example, she demonstrates how Bilbo's "The Old Walking Song" (the one that starts, "The road goes ever on and on"), is used by Tolkien for three distinct purposes in its three iterations across *The Lord of the Rings*, with its meaning subtly transformed both by context and by minute alteration of the lyrics. She notes, for example, how Frodo, when he borrows his beloved uncle's song for his own journey, substitutes "weary feet" for "eager feet," and how Bilbo, when he sings it again as an old man, soon to embark to the Blessed Realms, adopts his nephew's substitution. A song that was once a merry walking tune reaches profounder levels of meaning; the path in the song now, as Perrin puts it, "is his life in Middle-earth," and the weariness is Bilbo's exhaustion of having lived too long, his life drawn out by the ring (71). As Perrin acknowledges, the song, in its tripled iteration across the epic, becomes itself a pathway into meaning that would take far more than a single essay to unfold.

Sharp insights such as those I've just mentioned—stemming from artists in particular mediums using their expertise to illuminate corresponding aspects of Tolkien's work—constitute the highlights of this collection, which is weaker where it attempts to function in a more typical scholarly mode. This is true despite the fact that Charlie Starr's thoughtful and penetrating piece on Tolkien's theory of myth kicks off the more scholarly section on the right foot. Here, Starr traces Tolkien's understanding of myth up from his conception of language. Starr argues that Owen Barfield's understanding of ancient language, in which "all words contained both concrete and abstract meanings," informed not only Tolkien's philology, but his understanding of myth and its capacity to contain a meaning unattainable through other modes of exploration (9). The essay, the longest in the collection, is the work of a seasoned Tolkien scholar and serves as an excellent introduction into the philosophical world behind Tolkien's creations.

After Starr, though, the three subsequent essays of scholarly criticism produce confusion in addition to insight. While Bethany Ross's "Words with Wings: Divinely Inspired Imagination in Thought, Language and Reason" holds moments of brilliance, her essay attempts more than it can achieve. In eleven pages, she undertakes a generalized theology of the imagination in no fewer than four figures—Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and George MacDonald—with a brief excursus on Samuel Taylor Coleridge as well. I longed for her to stop at a single figure, or a single insight, and go deeper into its context and meaning.

The two essays following Ross's are at odds with each other on an important question of Tolkien scholarship. The question, at heart, is the age-old dilemma of Plato versus Aristotle: what are we to prioritize—the form within

the earthly object (Aristotle), or the higher meaning lent to the earthly object by its participation in a higher form (Plato)? Matthew Dickerson argues forcefully that Tolkien rejects all Platonism (which he associates with Gnosticism) in favor of a more immanent aesthetic that allows art to speak for itself rather than be reduced to a "message" (47). He references Tolkien's parable of artistic creation, "Leaf by Niggle," and the words of the angelic figure who describes Niggle's art: "He was a painter by nature. . . . He took a great deal of pains with leaves, just for their own sake" (46).

But the very next essay produces a nearly opposite interpretation of the same section of "Leaf by Niggle." Matthew Clark, in his "A Book Opens onto the Way: Tolkien's Sacramental Vision and the Artist's Call," identifies a theology of sacramental participation as a core element to Tolkien's thought and art. The great revelation of Niggle, then, is not so much the appreciation of the leaf just for its own sake, but the possibility of the leaf meaning *more than itself*, finding its consummation in its heavenly state. Clark writes, "In 'Leaf by Niggle,' Niggle (a painter) comes to understand his earthly material painting of a tree to have been a real participation in a transcendent reality, when he sees his painted tree made real in heaven" (61).

It seems Clark and Dickerson can't both be right in their interpretations of "Leaf by Niggle" or of Tolkien's theological aesthetic as a whole. This is not necessarily a bad thing: placing two contrasting essays next to each other could possibly produce an illuminating juxtaposition. However, I did not feel illuminated by the juxtaposition as presented, and I suspect the average reader would not either. This was partly due to the brevity of each piece and the quickness of the philosophical judgments. With such weighty material, perhaps more than ten pages per essay would have given the authors space to delve more deeply into their subject matter.

As a whole, the collection—despite these flaws—proves a worthwhile read. At times the collection's eccentricities produced frustrated questioning in me: Did we jump from scholarly article to artistic personal essay with no marked transition? Did this book properly define a scope, or did it cast the net so wide it could take in anything that came? But by the end, the collection's quirky vision, encompassing range, and relentless earnestness won me over. J.R.R. Tolkien was certainly not a by-the-book kind of man or writer, after all; perhaps an unorthodox approach is a prerequisite for capturing the unpredictable elements of the twentieth century's most beloved mythmaker.

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