Bridging the Modern Gap: Tolkien's Reintroduction of Providence to a Post-Modern World

Helen Lasseter, Baylor University

Epiphanies of Beauty, Center for Ethics/Culture: University of Notre Dame

November 20, 2004

I entitled this paper "Bridging the Modern Gap" because I believe J. R. R. Tolkien's work reflects an increasing gap between the secular and religious views of the world and humanity's place in it. In the wake of World War I a belief in providence was abandoned in the cultural imagination of England and replaced by a sense of fate. One can see the reflection of this in the literature of Tolkien's contemporaries – such as E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and so forth. Even fellow Catholic authors such as Evelyn Waugh in *Brideshead Revisited* depict a secular British society that has lost or given up on Christianity to live in a carpe diem fashion.

Tolkien's study of and love for Anglo-Saxon poetry combined with his deeply held Catholic faith influenced the formation of his own worldview. Contrary to his contemporaries in both his faith and the genre of his literature, Tolkien returns to Anglo-Saxon religious concerns and themes as relevant for our own time which has regressed towards a belief in the overwhelming power of fate over human life. Early Christian Anglo-Saxon scops struggled with the conflicting belief-systems of fate and providence and this struggle is seen in their use of the Old English word *wyrd* to mean at times fate and at others providence. *Wyrd* conveys a sense of human powerlessness before the gap between life and death, the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine.

Tolkien's work appeals to a contemporary audience for the same reason that Christianity appealed to the pagan Anglo-Saxons – both present a providential order that offers a sense of

hope for a mortal, and allows personal freedom of will in contrast to the helplessness isolation and impotence that exist within a fated or mechanical world.

In the brief moments I have for addressing such a large topic, I will attempt to illustrate how Tolkien uses the Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrd* in his own fiction to explore anew the perpetual tensions between providence, fate, and free will, and to reaffirm for the modern age the existence of a divine providential order present through all times.

First, as to the depiction of *wyrd* within the Anglo-Saxon world. The Anglo-Saxons shared with the Norse a similar pagan Germanic mythology which held that no one – neither god nor human – could escape the Ragnarök. *Wyrd* was understood as the fundamental power of the world bringing all creation towards its fiery destruction in the Ragnarök. This was the worldview that the early Christian missionaries first encountered. As the famous sparrow anecdote and the conversion of King Edwin from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* indicate, it was a culture which welcomed the new Christian philosophy of life that included a belief in providence and an eternal blissful afterlife.

The Wanderer, a poem of which Tolkien had intended to publish a critical study (according to Humphrey Carpenter) and translated lines of which Tolkien has Aragorn quote in *The Two Towers*, shows the complex and evolving Anglo-Saxon understanding of *wyrd* as a defined power of both fate and providence. The poet responds to the seeming dichotomy of belief in a providential God and the human experience of an apparently fated existence. He does this by contrasting the temporal to the eternal order and suggesting that since man is made for eternal life with God, life on earth apart from God is experienced as fated. The poet, thus, admits *wyrd* to be, on the one hand, as the pagans saw it – fate – but on the other hand, he also redefines

it as a tool of the providential God. He expands the pagan understanding of *wyrd* by introducing a belief in the existence of a spiritual realm over which *wyrd* has no power.

The presence of death and the harshness of life is a part of the Christian Anglo-Saxon life just as it is for the pagan. The truth of Christian faith does nothing to change the mortality of creation and the grief that arises in both the pagan and Christian heart over the loss of beloveds. Yet, what the *Wanderer*- poet recognizes is the transformation of the physical realm that the existence of a spiritual one makes possible. The work suggests that what is seen as fate from a temporal point of view is actually providential from a timeless perspective. The human experience of *wyrd*'s power, which is one of personal powerlessness, sadness and loss, is part of a greater divine plan to direct humans to their proper end of eternal life with God. Thus, while wyrd does work like fate, it also works as providence in drawing creation back to its *Metod*, its "creator."

Tolkien's two works *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* take up the Anglo-Saxon scops' struggle over *wyrd* and its implications for humanity. Tolkien follows the Anglo-Saxon conflicted sense of *wyrd* to mean, at times, the pagan view of fate, and at others, the Christian view of providence. *The Silmarillion* presents a greater contrast between these two meanings than *The Lord of the Rings* which resolves wyrd through a strong affirmation of a providential worldview. Tolkien places the senses of wyrd in conflict in *The Silmarillion* by presenting first a providential sense in the opening creation myth and then a more fatalistic sense in the following stories – this contrast is the differing perspectives from without and within time that the *Wanderer* poet focuses upon. Because of time, I am only going to cite two key stories – The Ainulindalë, or "Music of the Ainur" and the tragic tale of Túrin Turambar – which illustrate the two senses of *wyrd* that are present in the work.

“The Music of the Ainur,” the opening creation tale of *The Silmarillion*, was written while Tolkien was recovering from “trench fever” after his participation in WWI. Despite his witnessing the horrors of the Great War, Tolkien’s faith in the presence of a providential Trinitarian God remained, and he creates a world out of this faith. Christopher Tolkien points out that this was one of the earliest stories that his father wrote and it was the one which underwent the fewest of revisions over the next 50 years – a testimony to the vision of provident Tolkien was given even in the trenches. After Melkor, the rebellious angelic being, has interrupted and marred the harmony of the hosts several times, Ilúvatar, the supreme god of Tolkien’s cosmology, stops the growingly discordant music and warns Melkor, “no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined” (17). Ilúvatar then reveals to the Ainur a vision of their music’s creation that shows the important interplay of the Creator and the created’s wills. Ilúvatar says, “Behold your Music! … each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set b/f you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added. 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” (17). A clearer statement of the working of providence in the world could not have been made. It is one which fully allows for the presence of real evil in the world while also admitting of the stronger power of good over evil.

Yet, despite this affirmation and establishment of providence behind all activity both good and evil, the guiding hand of Ilúvatar, promised at the beginning, seems absent in the unfolding of the world in a way that it is not in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Túrin episode is one in which a providential hand is absent and yet which does not fully follow the logic of a fated

world, either. Rather, the episode suggests the personal responsibility a person bears from his freely made choices even in a world devoid of providence. The episode implies the wheels of fate have inexorably caught Túrin, and yet it also suggests that Túrin brings about his own disastrous fate through his free will. Thus, Tolkien, following the scops' use of *wyrd*, combines pagan and Christian belief systems by both suggesting such a force as fate exists while also admitting of the human responsibility in the outcome of his or her own life. Through a combination of fateful circumstances and bad choices, Túrin squanders his potential for greatness, and causes the ruin of those around him.

In case you are unfamiliar with this episode, let me briefly summarize the action. Túrin's father Hurin was captured by Melkor and horribly tortured. The narrator says Melkor, taking the title of "Master of the fates of Arda," "cursed Hurin and Morwen and their offspring, and set a doom upon them of darkness and sorrow" (197). Túrin's mother sends him away for safety to the elven realm of Doriath under the protection of King Thingol and the narrator indicates "thus was the fate of Túrin woven" (198). After believing he has slain one of the elves in a fight, Túrin runs away and refuses to accept the forgiveness of Thingol and return to Doriath. He becomes a bandit who indiscriminately attacks others – orcs, elves, and humans. He accidentally kills his closest friend, Beleg, rescues and marries a woman who turns out to be his sister. Discovering they have an incestuous relationship, the sister, Nienor, kills herself and then Túrin, regretting the sins of his past life and despairing in his future, also commits suicide. This episode both indicates wyrd is fate and also questions the exclusive role of wyrd in controlling life. On the one hand, the narrator sets up the story as illustrating Melkor's curse. Yet, on the other hand, the story repeatedly shows the hero making bad choices that result in an evil consequence. If wyrd were exclusively the power of fate, Túrin would have a choice only between two evils. Bertha

Phillpotts, an Anglo-Saxon scholar contemporary to Tolkien, defines the Norse and Anglo-Saxon depiction of fate as just this, “the forced choice between two evil courses” (2). However, Túrin is offered an alternative choice which he refuses.

One could argue that the clearest example of the wheels of fate catching up unwilling participants is in this disastrous marriage of Túrin to his sister, Nienor. Yet, this marriage is the result of several previous choices Túrin has made and thus one could also argue that Túrin brings about his and his family’s destruction by his own free will. For instance, had he not originally refused his friend Beleg’s request on behalf of the king, Thingol, to return to Doriath, then he would not have been captured by the orcs, and have killed Beleg accidentally; rather, he would have reunited with his mother and sister in Doriath. Had Nienor found him there, she would not have run off to look for him, been captured by orcs, escaped naked into the woods where Túrin found her. Túrin’s denial of Thingol’s request to return to Doriath to accept forgiveness, and to protect the surrounding lands from orcs is the central choice Túrin makes that leads to the rest of his tragic life. The narrator states, “in the pride of his heart Túrin refused the pardon of the King, and the words of Beleg were of no avail to change his mood” (201). The Túrin episode shows that Tolkien’s characters are not pawns of fate and though evil forces affect the choices they make, they retain the real power of their free will. Yet, what makes Túrin’s final destruction so poignant is the combined nature of both fateful circumstances and Túrin’s own free will. Providence, however, the way in which Ilúvatar weaves this sad story into glory, remains hidden from both the characters of the story and the readers of it.

Contrary to *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings* retains throughout the story the active presence of a providential hand working with a person’s free will to achieve a good end. Yet, *The Lord of the Rings* also depicts those who despair of providence and believe themselves

inescapably trapped by malevolent powers of fate. In the face of the textual evidence of providence's presence, the rejection of a providential *wyrd* by a character, such as Denethor, in favor of a fated understanding is all the more tragic.

Denethor, like Túrin, despairs of providence and embodies a hopeless worldview similar to the modern one, and Tolkien depicts him in a pitiful, and frighteningly familiar fashion. After all the long centuries of patient endurance and valiant resistance by his forefathers, Denethor, in his time, despairs of goodness, of victory, of a return of the King, and he refuses to fight against evil if failure and destruction are inevitable. He declares, "The West has failed. It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. …. Battle is vain. Why should we wish to live longer?" Gandalf, speaking from a providential worldview, warns: "Authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death, and only the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair!" "Pride and despair!" replies Denethor, "I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool. For thy hope is but ignorance. Go then and labour in healing ! Go forth and fight! Vanity. … Against the Power that now arises there is no victory. . . . The West has failed." (129). Despite a belief in the fiery destruction of the world similar to the pagan Norse, Denethor's decision to kill himself and his son prior to the Ragnarök is a modern reaction and one which both the pagans and early Anglo-Saxon Christians would have rejected. One hears the concluding lines of William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus" – "I am the Master of my fate/ I am the captain of my soul" – echoed in Denethor's speech claiming self-rule and self-mastery for both arise from a post-Enlightenment mind which sees that an individual's only power before the machinations of fate is that of self-definition. He declares: "I would have things as they were in all the days of my life. … But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*; neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated. . . . In

this at least thou shalt not defy my will: to rule my own end!" And having claimed this right, Denethor casts himself into the fire.

Gandalf's admonition of Denethor's suicide hints at the existence of the unseen providential power within the world that has authority over the lives, or fates, of Middle-earth's inhabitants. It is in assertions such as Gandalf's that *wyrd* is transformed in *The Lord of the Rings* from its more ambiguous depiction in *The Silmarillion* to its clear depiction as the providential guidance promised in the opening of *The Silmarillion*. Examples of a strong, providential hand in *The Lord of the Rings* abound. To briefly mention just a few of these: Gandalf's conversation with Frodo at the outset of the tale about a beneficent power intending the two hobbits to find and possess the Ring; the hobbits' "chance" meeting with Aragorn at Bree; Elrond's words at the Council which hint at the power, presence, and activity of a providential divine being within Middle-earth; Frodo's struggle in the Seat of Seeing on Amon Hen which highlights the important interaction of free will with providence; and Sam's vision of the beautiful star shining even in the heart of Mordor. Providential *wyrd* also works in the repeated pattern of a seemingly disastrous event leading to an outcome better than anything the characters could have accomplished without the disaster. Such examples of providential disaster are Gandalf's fall in Mordor; Boromir's death and the Uruk-Hai's taking of Merry and Pippin. Yet, the most important providential disaster is Frodo's failure to destroy the Ring at the end of the Quest.

This is the example I would like to focus more closely upon to illustrate how providence works not as an imposed outside power on a puppet creation, but as a power that works with and through both the good and evil choices of a free creation. Such a conclusion to the quest

disturbs many readers of *The Lord of the Rings* because after 1000 pages of the reader journeying with Frodo to Mt. Doom, the final failure of the hero is very singularly anti-heroic.

At the last, Frodo's will is not strong enough to defeat evil. This bothers the modern reader who has been schooled to deny evil as a real spiritual force working against people but to accept the supremacy of the individual's power in overcoming adversity. Tolkien counters both of these modern assumptions by showing Frodo is not strong enough to defeat the power of embodied evil. A stronger power is needed to defeat it. Tolkien here is not setting up a Manichean balance of good and evil nor is he discounting the importance of the person in the defeat of evil. A long series of providential activities which guide and depend upon a person's free will, results in the Ring's destruction. The very failure of Frodo at the end to destroy the Ring and its subsequent destruction at the hands of Gollum show more faithfully providence's role in both this secondary world and the primary one. The conflict on Mt. Doom reflects the reality that created beings are not so powerful that they can overcome all odds, particularly supernatural or spiritual ones, nor are they so miniscule that they serve merely as tools to be used or abused for the pleasure of their creator.

Providence is the interaction of divine will and mortal free will and the paternal guidance by providence of creation. This plays out in *The Lord of the Rings* through the choices the characters make throughout the story. The specific choice the text highlights is the choice of Bilbo, Frodo, and Samwise, to show pity and mercy to an undeserving creature like Gollum. In response to Frodo's original disgust that Bilbo did not kill Gollum, Gandalf says, "It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need" (69). Remembering Gandalf's words regarding the proper ordering of life, Frodo later chooses also to spare Gollum's life out of pity and mercy. Gandalf's original declaration that "the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many"

expands to include the pity of Frodo and then of Samwise as he, too, after his long justified antagonism against Gollum, shows him mercy at the very entrance to Mt. Doom. Yet, while this choice of mercy works positively within those that show mercy, Gollum does not choose to accept the grace these acts extend to him. In this way, the story suggests that not even a creature as fallen as Gollum is fated, but he bears moral responsibility in the outcome of his own decisions and choices. Immediately after Sam spares his life, Gollum proceeds to attack Sam and seize the Ring from Frodo. In his ecstasy at reclaiming his precious, Gollum "accidentally" loses his footing and falls with the Ring into the fire. Frodo, having been freed from the Ring by Gollum, honors the other's role in achieving the Quest's end. He says to Sam "do you remember Gandalf's words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the Quest is achieved…" (225).

Gollum's actions illustrate Ilúvatar's statement in *The Silmarillion* that he will take all actions and shape them for the good. It is important to emphasize, however, that the unseen Providential power at work here does not force Gollum into his and the Ring's mutual destruction, but rather it takes the evil consequence of Gollum's choices to achieve the good end, the destruction of the Ring, that could not have been achieved simply by the strength of Frodo's moral will to cast it into the fire.

This surprising turn of events for the good demonstrates Tolkien's theory of "eucatastrophe," a concept that he believed to be both a key feature of the fairy story but more particularly of the Christian faith. The eucatastrophe is the unlooked for, unexpected final triumph of good over evil that does not always occur within the temporal order and which is best

understood in context of the Christian narrative. Tolkien's narrative depiction of the eucatastrophe is also an affirmation of *wyrd* as providence for a 20th century audience.

Contrary to most of modern and contemporary fiction in which dominates a hopeless vision of human life, Tolkien creates a story deeply imbued with a sense of hope because of the existence of providence. Yet his works are not merely optimistic fantasies, in the real sense of the word, but they convey both the dark reality of a fallen world along with the promise of redemption for creation that a belief in the Incarnation allows. *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly, deeply resonated and continues to resonate with its audience because it reconnects its audience to the reality of providence's presence in the world. Tolkien's work, reflecting the Anglo-Saxon scops' consideration and depiction of *wyrd*, offers an alternative to a pagan belief of humanity's powerlessness and insignificance before greater forces of time and space. The work reflects the conflict of fated or providential worldviews, yet in powerfully affirming the greater presence of providence through all times, Tolkien's work offers a needed alternative and a new path for a culture long absent of hope to follow. Applying Tolkien's words from *Tree and Leaf* to my context, Tolkien's work "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium,* giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (86).