From the Flame Imperishable to the Silmarils: The dimming of lights in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

Patrícia Sá[1]

Abstract: In J.R.R. Tolkien's The Silmarillion, Light permeates the world from its prime to its dimmest hues. Authors such as Lisa Coutras, Verlyn Flieger, and Reno E. Lauro have expertly explored the role of light in Ëa, and, in this essay, I draw on their theories to investigate the way light and darkness are portrayed from the beginning of creation to the making of the Silmarils. Recalling Lauro's allusion to medieval theories of light, I suggest a look at Eä as a world built on refractions of a pure, all-encompassing light that grows progressively dimmer, until its encapsulation in three jewels, going from a source of wonder

---

[1] Patrícia Sá é mestre em Estudos Comparatistas pela Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL), com uma dissertação sobre ecos literários de Frankenstein, monstruosidade e transumanismo. É [membro integrado](#) do Centro de Estudos Comparatistas da FLUL e autora na antologia Sangue Novo (2021), que venceu o Grande Prémio Adamastor de Literatura Fantástica Portuguesa de 2022. O seu conto «Amor» foi finalista do Prémio Adamastor de Ficção Fantástica em Conto de 2022. Colabora no website *[Fábrica do Terror](#)*, coorganizou a jornada ["Nosferatu: 100 Anos de Terror"](#) e coeditou o volume homónimo a ser publicado em 2023. E-mail: [patricia.p.sa@edu.ulisboa.pt](#)

Patrícia Sá has an MA in Comparative Studies awarded by the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, with a dissertation on literary echoes of Frankenstein, monstrosity, and transhumanism. She is a [full member](#) of the Centre for Comparative Studies of the same university, and an author in the anthology Sangue Novo (2021), which won the Great Adamastor Award of Portuguese Fantastic Literature of 2022. Her short story "Amor" was a finalist for the Great Adamastor Award of Fantastic Fiction in Short Stories of 2022. She writes for the website [Fábrica do Terror](#), she has co-organized the event ["Nosferatu: 100 Anos de Terror"](#), and co-edited the homonymous book to be published in 2023. E-mail: [patricia.p.sa@edu.ulisboa.pt](#)

to an object of desire. Light, in The Silmarillion, is synonymous with good, beauty, and truth, but it scorches and punishes those who misuse it. Furthermore, in this essay I corroborate the theories that darkness − not the primeval darkness, but Morgoth's evil, consuming darkness − is a deformation of the light that gave shape and life to Ilúvatar's creation. As such, I aim to briefly examine Arda's initial lights and their waning as not only a reflection of the increasing separation from their primary principle, but also a result of both the entrance of evil in the world, and Fëanor's hybris, which sealed the Elves of his house's fate.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien; The Silmarillion; Light; Medieval Philosophy; Darkness

Resumo: Em *O Silmarillion*, de J.R.R. Tolkien, a luz permeia o mundo, desde o seu esplendor máximo, à sua luminosidade mais ténue. Autores como Lisa Coutras, Verlyn Flieger e Reno E. Lauro exploraram eximiamente o papel da luz em Ëa e, neste ensaio, servimo-nos dessas teorias para averiguar o modo como a luz e a escuridão são representadas desde o começo da criação ao fabrico dos Silmarils. Lembrando a alusão de Lauro às teorias medievais acerca da luz, sugerimos uma perspetiva sobre Ëa enquanto mundo feito de refrações de uma luz totalizante e pura, que se atenua progressivamente até ao seu enclausuramento em três jóias, deixando de ser encarada como fonte de encanto e passando a ser objeto de desejo. A Luz, n'*O Silmarillion*, é sinónimo de *bom*, *belo* e *verdadeiro*, mas queima e castiga quem a usar indevidamente. Além disso, neste ensaio corroboramos as teses de que a escuridão − não a escuridão primordial, mas a escuridão malvada e absorvente de Morgoth − é uma deformação da luz que deu forma e vida a toda a criação de Ilúvatar. Assim, procuramos examinar, brevemente, as luzes iniciais em Arda e o seu enfraquecimento, não só como um reflexo da separação progressiva do seu princípio

primário, mas também como resultado da entrada do mal em Arda e da *hybris* de Fëanor, que selou o destino dos Elfos da sua casa.

Palavras-chave: J.R.R. Tolkien; O Silmarillion; Luz; Filosofia Medieval; Escuridão

> *Ëa!* Let these things Be! And I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it
>
> shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be […].
>
> (Tolkien [1977] 2013, 9)

In his famous letter to Milton Waldman, J.R.R. Tolkien lays down key elements for an interpretation of his *legendarium* as a mythology for England, which he felt his country lacked. According to him, the main lenses from which to look at his literary work are as follows:

> […] Mortality, especially as it affects art and the creative […] desire which seems to have no biological function, and to be apart from the satisfactions of plain ordinary biological life, with which […] it is indeed usually at strife. This desire is at once wedded to a passionate love of the real primary world, and hence filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it. It has various opportunities of 'Fall'. It may become possessive, […] the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator−especially against mortality. Both of these […] will lead to the desire for Power, […]−and so to the Machine (or Magic). […] Their [the Elves'] magic is Art […]. And its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous reforming of Creation. […] The Enemy […] is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination […]; but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root […] is a recurrent motive (1951, xiii-xiv).

While it is tempting to invoke Tolkien's Catholicism, I highlight instead the quality he found in the stories of peoples such as the Greeks, the Celtic, and the Scandinavian, which he favoured: "Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of

moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world" (Tolkien 1951, xi). It is suggested here that these stories ought to speak of a primeval, universal *truth*, and that the art produced by humans (what Tolkien viewed as sub-creations of a primary reality created by God) should express that truth. As such, Tolkien wrote of a 'fall' and a separation from a creator figure, which occurs due to a challenge or a revolt against the laws of this creator, and the desire of the created to become creator. This desire does not translate a mere aim to build secondary worlds, but to usurp the primary creator, to 'play God', and submit others to one's will. What is more, Tolkien's sub-creation relies on the premise that the world sprouted from an ultimately *good*, *true*, and *beautiful* principle, and that evil is a corruption of it. Light is the initial thread from which the world created by Eru Ilúvatar, in *The Silmarillion* (1977), takes shape, while darkness – not the primeval darkness, but Morgoth's evil, consuming darkness – is a deformation of that light.

The Silmarillion tells of the creation of Ëa (the world that is) and Arda by the thought of Ilúvatar, turned into music by his Ainur and Valar, the equivalent of angelic figures in Tolkien's *legendarium*. It also tells of a fall, not only of the Vala Melkor, but that of the Elves, the first Children of Ilúvatar, as well. As Tolkien states in his letter to Waldman: "The main body of the tale, the *Silmarillion* proper, is about the fall of the most kindred of the Elves, their exile from Valinor (a kind of Paradise, the home of the Gods) […], their re-entry into Middle-earth, […] long under the rule of the Enemy, and their strife with him […]" (1951, 16). Before this fall, the world of Arda was illuminated by the light of the Lamps, then by that of the Two Trees, and, lastly, by the Sun and Moon, which, in Tolkien's world, stand for "a fallen world, and a dislocated imperfect vision" (1951, 17).

My essay will concern the first lights in Arda, from the Flame Imperishable to the Silmarils, as well as the first shadows of evil brought by Melkor, such as the Unlight of

Ungoliant. I will stray from a biblical interpretation and follow a line of thought already explored by Reno E. Lauro, anchoring the presentation of light in *The Silmarillion* in medieval theories of light. I will also examine how the Silmarils have been regarded, namely by authors such as Verlyn Flieger, as jewels symbolizing human desire, and how their maker's attempt to capture Light for himself is the catalyst for the fall of the Elves. Finally, I aim to illustrate how even though Ilúvatar's Light is meant to be regarded with admiration it nevertheless generated dissatisfaction, namely in the Vala Melkor and the Elf Fëanor, which led to the fostering of perverse feelings and thoughts that resulted in the two main falls in Tolkien's story. However, despite these catastrophes, *The Silmarillion* retains a hopeful tone, as any fairy-story ought to, in Tolkien's view. In "On Fairy Stories", he argues that fairy-stories provide "the Consolation of the Happy Ending" (Tolkien [1983] 1997, 153). No matter how bleak they may be, fairy-stories should guide their readers towards a joyful turn, a response to hope, and the assurance that strife is not permanent. In fact:

> The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale) […]. In its fairy-tale–or otherworld–setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it 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 (Tolkien [1983] 1997, 153-154).

In writing *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien set to create a fairy-story of such quality, and he achieves this hopeful turn through Light. It permeates *The Silmarillion* from its prime to its dimmest hues. As Asli Bulbi points out,

> [L]ight is involved in every aspect of the secondary world by being physical, transcendental, and symbolical. It is physical because it visibly illuminates places to bring life, it is transcendental as each artefact containing Ilúvatar's light serves the purpose of bringing good into Arda by fighting against evil and echoing his perfection. It is symbolical by being the representation of hope (2022, 36).

Light is the visible manifestation of the music sung by the Ainur, which gave shape to the world. As it is described in the beginning of the *Valaquenta*, the second book of *The Silmarillion*,

> […] Ilúvatar made visible the song of the Ainur, and they beheld it as a light in the darkness. And many among them became enamoured of its beauty, and of its history […]. Therefore, Ilúvatar gave to their vision Being, and set it amid the Void, and the Secret Fire was sent to burn at the heart of the World […]. (Tolkien 2013, 15)

In this passage, it is revealed that, before Eä, besides Ilúvatar, there was darkness and a void, and that the Secret Fire is the life force of creation, present in each of its elements. The biblical resonances have been highlighted by authors like Susan Robbins (2018, 175), who recalls the beginning of the world as portrayed in the Genesis, commencing in darkness and chaos, before God's command, "Let there be light" (Gn. 1: 3). Furthermore, the Secret Fire, or the Flame Imperishable, is associated with the Holy Spirit (Robbins 2018; Juričková 2015) since it is "needed to give life to the created things. It burns in them and without it the things would die" (Juričková 2015, 17).

Nevertheless, as Martina Juričková points out, "[i]n spite of the general likeness, the *Ainulindalë* [first book of *The Silmarillion*] is not simply a retelling of the Genesis story of creation with just substitute names and different environment" (2015, 15). Despite any religious motivation on Tolkien's part, *The Silmarillion* ought to stand on its own, and the

differences between the two tales abound enough for a more independent reading. For instance, if one pays close attention to the words used at the start of the *Valaquenta*–"light", "beauty", "Being"–, Tolkien's narrative seems to exude a medieval quality of thought, like Reno E. Lauro has suggested. In fact, he defends that, while it is unclear whether Tolkien retrieved his theory from medieval considerations of light, he

> draws on the medieval aesthetics of light – an aesthetic sensibility which drew on the ancient tradition of relating light to things divine – to express his own aesthetic vision. Inversely, Tolkien uses the privation of light to represent horror and evil (2008, 55).

Bulbi corroborates this idea, stating that "[i]n his world-building, Tolkien continues to present light imagery with Neoplatonic features which reached full expression through the medieval aesthetics of light" (Bulbi 2022, 52). Indeed, echoes of Neoplatonism and the theories of theologists such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine of Hippo reverberate throughout Tolkien's *legendarium*. According to Umberto Eco, "philosophers and mystics alike were enthralled by luminosity in general […]" (Eco 1986, 46) and they "developed the philosophy of light in two ways – as a kind of physico-aesthetical cosmology, and as an ontology of form" (1986, 48). Eco (as well as Lauro) cites the theories of Grosseteste, to whom *light* was "the greatest and best of all proportions, as proportionate with itself" (1986, 48-49), thus inherently beautiful, and *it* conceived

> the image for a universe shaped by a unique flux of light-giving energy, at once the source of beauty and of being. It was next door to Emanationism. Out of the unique Light, progressively condensing and diminishing, came the astral spheres and the elements of nature, and thence the infinite gradations of hue and the volumes and activities of all things (1986, 49).

Beauty was crucial in medieval thought, particularly for the Scholastics, who viewed it as an attribute of God. It was equated to 'good', and both concepts were regarded as reflections of a primary principle. Indeed, according to Eco, Dyonisius the Areopagite's *De Divinis Nominibus* (1265-1266) describes the universe "as an inexhaustible irradiation of beauty, a grandiose expression of the ubiquity of the First Beauty, a dazzling cascade of splendours" (1986, 18). This theory heavily influenced St. Thomas Aquinas, who went further and considered that

> the beauty we find in all things is a participation in (rather than a mere reflection of) a beauty which is identified with the First Good and therefore with Being. […] He [God] is beautiful in himself and not in respect of anything else […]. God, then, is the creator of beauty in the world. And he creates it by means of consonance and light. […] God, the Supreme Beauty, creates all things in accordance with the order and the effulgence which are constitutive elements in the value which he shares with others. The divine beauty is creative because it produces order and harmony […]. Furthermore, beauty is the effective cause of being, and the final and the exemplary cause of the created world (Eco 1988, 27-28).

Thus, Aquinas's thought retains Neoplatonic qualities, with an absolute principle which encompasses the totality of *being*, *beauty*, and *good*, and from which the rest of the universe emanates. It is similar to Tolkien's world, with Ilúvatar as the absolute primary principle, the First Light from which the entire universe radiates, yet it is beyond all being, like the Neoplatonic Absolute[2]. As Aquinas further elaborates, the created things

---

[2] "The Absolute does not allow itself to be assembled with Being in a totality which encompasses both of these, Being and the Absolute, but rather it always transcends any such horizon of totality" (Halfwassen 2014, 417-418).

have their being in beauty and goodness […]. And they turn toward beauty and goodness and desire them as their end . . . And all things are and all things become because of beauty and goodness, and all things look to them, as to an exemplary cause, which they possess as a rule governing their activities. (Aquinas *apud* Eco 1988, 29)

To Aquinas, God was at once *being*, *goodness*, and *beauty*, and what is deemed *beautiful*, insofar as it is desired, expresses what is *true* (Eco 1988, 32). As a matter of fact, in *The Silmarillion*, the inhabitants of Arda are forever attracted to the sources of light, though not any light: specifically, the Light of Valinor, where the Valar dwell. Therefore, I find Lauro's argument that "it does not require a great leap of imagination to see how the metaphysics of light serves as a source for Tolkien's mythopoeic conception of the human imagination's work refracting the originary light of creation" (Lauro 2008, 61) highly persuasive.

Indeed, if we look at Eä as a world built on light refractions, we may begin to understand the central role of light. As Lisa Coutras upholds,

light is a defining feature of Tolkien's ancient paradise, holding little to no distinction from transcendental beauty, for this primeval light is the unsullied radiance of created reality. […] All things that exist are connected by the common act of existing; they share an ontological light (Coutras 2016, 55).

This idea of transcendental beauty has medieval origins as well, as proposed by the Scholastics, who sought to determine that

transcendental properties were 'concomitant conditions' of being. If it were established that the values of unity, truth, and goodness are not actualised sporadically

and accidentally, but adhere rather to being as co-extensive metaphysical properties, then it would follow that all existence is one, true, and good (Eco 1986, 19-20).

Eä was first foretold by Ilúvatar, who delegated the making of it to his Ainur. They were to go to the world and become its sources of life. The Ainur that went into the world were named Valar, the Powers of the World, and they were tasked with building Arda for the arrival of the Children of Ilúvatar, the Elves and Men. They bring lights into Ilúvatar's creation, lights which, by virtue of their distance from their origin, grow dimmer. The first lights in Arda are those of the Lamps, Illuin and Ormal, positioned at opposite ends, to the north and the south of Middle-earth, "so that all was lit as it were in a changeless day" (Tolkien 2013, 27). Therefore, the first lights brought no night with them. However, Melkor, the Ainu who made dissonance in the Ainur's Music, breaks the Lamps, and "[t]he first light is quenched and cannot be renewed" (Flieger [1983] 2002, 63). Albeit, in *The Silmarillion*, what is destroyed cannot be rebuilt as it first was, this does not mean that light is erased from the world. The Vala Yavanna then makes the Two Trees of Valinor, Telperion and Laurelin, yet, instead of an unchanging light, their glow wanes, shining intermittently, and providing Valinor with "a gentle hour of softer light when both trees were faint and their gold and silver beams were mingled" (2002, 31-32), thus marking the counting of days in Arda.

Furthermore, light, in *The Silmarillion*, is not only a life force, a creative and organizing principle, but also a source of attraction. Its progressive dimness does not alter its pull, as Elves and Men alike are constantly drawn West, to Valinor. As Flieger writes,

In fulfilling his [Ilúvatar's] purpose, the Valar are already at one remove from his wholeness, for they bring to the world not light but lights, a variety of lights of differing kinds and progressively lessening intensities. Each light that comes is dimmer than the one before it, splintered by Tolkien's sub-creators. […] Increasingly

as the story progresses, we are shown, through character, deed, and word, that Elves
and Men are in their different ways drawn to the light and yet separated from it. The
whole work is permeated by an air of deepening sorrow, a sense of loss, of
estrangement, and ever-widening distance from the light and all that it signifies (2002,
60).

This feeling mirrors that of humans after being cast out of Eden, in the Bible, forever seeking
a reunion with God. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, while Elves have seen the lights of
Valinor and were brought there by the Valar, Men have not seen them, yet feel a pull towards
the West, an innate instinct that there they will find the light they seek–"Westwards our
hearts have been turned, and we believe that there we shall find Light" (Tolkien 2013, 164).

Interestingly, the enemy figure in *The Silmarillion*, Morgoth, is also drawn towards
light. He is not portrayed as an opposite force on the same level as Ilúvatar's Light, but rather
a warped product of it. Tolkien's world appears to follow a similar logic to St Augustine's
theory that "evil has no existence except as a privation of good, down to that level which is
altogether without being" (St. Augustine *apud* Bergen 2017, 108). Indeed, Tolkien, according
to authors such as Tom Shippey and Richard Angelo Bergen, "held the view that good and
evil are not evenly matched because evil is merely *privatio boni* […]. The implication is that
all beings are created good but exercise their free will to choose evil" (Bergen 2017, 108).
This interpretation seems to hold up, as, before the Light of Ilúvatar, there was Void, and
darkness as a synonym for evil only appeared once Morgoth set to corrupt Arda with his
hatred, jealousy, and greed. Morgoth was once Melkor, the most powerful of the Valar,
before rebelling and separating from Ilúvatar, moved by a desire to become, himself, a
creator, not merely a sub-creator like his kin, meant to mould Ëa in accordance with
Ilúvatar's design. However, he can only make use of what was created by Ilúvatar and

profane his light. Authors, such as Juričková, have equated him to Satan in Christianity, who, like Melkor, "was the greatest and cleverest angel" (Juričková 2016, 24), but

> cannot create anything of his own, no matter how big his power was. […] They can only *make*, that is only transform and disfigure things that were created by the Creator. […] Only God can *create* in the true sense of the word, because he is the only one who can give life to non-living things. The Evil simply cannot give life for he has not been given the power (2016, 25-26).

Melkor's attraction to light becomes even more apparent when he learns of the Silmarils, jewels created by the Elf Fëanor, which held the light of the Trees of Valinor. Melkor intends to steal the Silmarils and gathers the help of Ungoliant, a being of unknown origins but with a unique characteristic: "she hungered for light and hated it" (Tolkien 2013, 77). It is said that Ungoliant was once Melkor's servant and has the shape of

> a spider of monstrous form, weaving her black webs in a cleft of the mountains. There she sucked up all the 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; and she was famished (Tolkien 2013, 77).

Ungoliant is another example of an enemy character attracted to light, though in a more visceral level, as she feels an unending hunger for it, all the while loathing it. However, she defiles all light that she devours, regurgitating it as terrible darkness. Truly horrific is the possibility of light, the source of creation, to be so altered as to become something other, deathly, poisonous, not merely disappearing. Indeed, Lisa Coutras asserts that "[i]n Tolkien's world, horror is evoked by the profaning of transcendence" (Coutras 2016, 130). Meanwhile, Flieger considers that

> The introduction of Ungoliant […] is further evidence of Tolkien's continuing concern with the theme of light perverted. […] Ungoliant needs light; she craves it more fiercely than Melkor, or Fëanor, or any other creature in Tolkien's world. […] She feeds on light, quite literally sucking it in and belching it forth as darkness, a ghastly perversion of nourishment and a perversion also of the light. Meant to shine, it is now ingested, turned in on itself and given out again as its opposite. […] This Darkness, the Unlight of Ungoliant, is not just darkness in the place of light; it is darkness made out of light […] (Flieger 2002, 108).

Melkor uses Ungoliant to poison the Trees of Valinor–"the poison of Death that was in her [Ungoliant] went into their [the Trees'] tissues and withered them, root, branch, and leaf; and they died. […] Ungoliant belched forth black vapours as she drank […]" (Tolkien 2013, 80)–, and a great darkness descends upon the Blessed Realm. As previously stated, this darkness was greater than a mere absence of light: "the Darkness that followed was more than loss of light. In that hour was made a darkness that seemed not lack but a thing of its own: for it was indeed made by malice out of Light […]" (2013, 80). Flieger defends that this is not the same as the primeval darkness, which was neutral–"[t]he darkness of creation before the light of the Lamps is not to be seen as a negative but as a neutral" (Flieger 2002, 108). The darkness that appeared after the death of the Trees not only revealed the failure of the Light of Valinor, but the birth of evil as well. It is absence made present, seemingly alive, with a will of its own. However, as formerly mentioned, it is not an opposite equal to Light; it is its twisted offspring. As Coutras points out, "its 'being' remains dependent on the reality of light, yet it has taken light and created 'Unlight'" (Coutras 2016, 128). Thus, "[e]vil is a privation of the good yet possesses a force and power of horror that renders it a reality onto itself" (2016, 127). Nonetheless, Ungoliant's Unlight retains the void from which it

originated, "in which things seem to be no more, and which eyes could not pierce, for it was void" (Tolkien 2013, 77).

Although light, having been created by Eru Ilúvatar, is supremely good, beautiful, and true, giving shape and life to all of creation, it can also be used for evil. In fact, its variant – fire – was used by Morgoth to make his abode and wage war – "[…] and fire came from the fissures in the earth, and the Iron Mountains vomited flame" (2013, 131). What is more, Flieger suggests that fire "has in itself the immediate potential either to help or to harm, to warm or to consume" (Flieger 2002, 102). As such, fire is also the mark of Fëanor, considered the most gifted of the Noldor Elves, and viewed by Flieger as a representative for humanity, gathering both its positive and negative attributes. She relates Fëanor to the figure of Prometheus, arguing that

> we can see in the stories of both […] the time-honored mythic theme of the overreacher, the figure whose excess is punished yet whose accomplishments succeed in bringing a spark to humanity that can elevate it above its original condition and carry it forward (2002, 103).

It is Fëanor who makes the Silmarils, great jewels infused with the light of Telperion and Laurelin, which are coveted by both himself and Melkor. The Silmarils, according to Flieger,

> embody light as a physical reality […]. As jewels, they are a metaphor for the desire of humankind for beauty and for the negative of this desire — possessiveness, covetousness, selfishness, and lust. […] They are the embodiments of Tolkien's theme of the power of light. It is through the Silmarils that he makes his clearest statement about the need for light, the impulse to seek it or turn toward it, and the perversion of that impulse into lust and hatred as desire turns in on itself and

possession masters the possessor. The story becomes an exploration of the various effects of light and the terrible way in which this light, wholly good in itself, can yet lead into darkness, can even in the ultimate inversion of its quality become that darkness (2002, 107-108).

Truly, Fëanor embodies many characteristics of alchemists before the coming of modern science, who were "solitary workers – and the fruit of their labours has been their own experience and exploration" (Ramsay [1997] 2017, 16). Likewise, Fëanor was "driven by the fire of his own heart only, working ever swiftly and alone; and he asked the aid and sought the counsel of none […]" (Tolkien 2013, 67). In making the Silmarils, Fëanor sought to find a way to permanently preserve the light of the trees (arguably a Promethean, hubristic wish, aiming to surpass what his condition allows for), and so "began a long and secret labour, and he summoned all his lore, and his power, and his subtle skill; and at the end of all he made the Silmarils" (2013, 68). The Vala Varda, who made the stars, blessed the jewels, "so that thereafter no mortal flesh, nor hands unclean, nor anything of evil might touch them, but it was scorched and withered" (2013, 68-69), and Mandos, the Vala of justice, "foretold that the fates of Arda, earth, sea, and air, lay locked within them" (2013, 69). So, the Silmarils both harboured the light of the Trees of Valinor and became the symbol of the fate of the world, destined to fall as a creation tarnished by evil and *hybris*. Varda's blessing touches Melkor once he steals the jewels and his hands "were burned black by the touch of those hallowed jewels, and black they remained ever after" (2013, 86), a mark of Light's punishment to those who intend to misuse it. On the other hand, according to Flieger, Fëanor is similar to the fire contained in the Silmarils, and even to the light of the Lamps, as his own "fire is of such fierceness and intensity that when not properly contained and used, it scorches and destroys what it touches" (Flieger 2002, 109). Fëanor's tale thus suggests that covetousness ultimately corrupts and destroys. Flieger argues that

We cannot but see in Fëanor's appropriation and hoarding of the Silmarils a perversion of desire for the light and as ruinous misuse of its essential quality.

Light is not to be held or flaunted as personal adornment or locked away from the sight of all. Light is not to be the property of any person, and those who seek to possess it exclusively have lost sight of it altogether. Loving too well the work of his hands, in his very need to treasure and hoard the light, Fëanor has given up his capacity to see it clearly. All of his subsequent actions stem from this need, which will ultimately send him on a disastrous journey outward to dim and starlit Middle-earth and on an equally disastrous journey inward and downward into a psychological darkness at once real, metaphoric, and spiritual (2002, 107).

The closer one gets to the light, the blinder one becomes. Fëanor seals his fate and that of his descendants with an oath to seek out the Silmarils,

vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil, […] who so should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession (Tolkien 2013, 89).

This oath brings misfortune and tragedy to both Fëanor's house and Middle-earth at large, thereby fulfilling Mandos's prediction. I am once more reminded of Tolkien's words to Milton Waldman, as he highlights that dissatisfaction can lead to a fall, insomuch as it may inspire selfish desires: Fëanor, indeed, became possessive of his Silmarils, a sub-creator who wished "to be the Lord and God of his private creation" (Tolkien 2013, xiii). However, he never quite reaches the heights of Morgoth's fall, who, by rebelling "against the laws of the Creator", began nurturing "the desire for power […], domination and tyrannous reforming of Creation" (2013, xiii-xiv). Therefore, Fëanor can indeed be seen as a character who exemplifies human ambition and skill, capable of the biggest achievements, and the most

terrible destruction, or, as Flieger puts it, we "see in him [Fëanor] humanity's potential poised always on the edge, balanced between light and darkness". (Flieger 2002, 109)

In *The Silmarillion*, light is not only the connecting thread of the narrative, but also of the entirety of Ilúvatar's creation. All creatures, good or evil, share an innate light, a primeval fire that burns within and gives them life. Thus, it is not surprising that the Children of Ilúvatar are drawn towards it and aim to reach Valinor, where Light shines in all its splendour, whereas Middle-earth is filled with night and marred by an evil darkness. The despair they find the more distant they are from the light is related to a feeling of displacement, and of estrangement from oneself. Something seems to be missing, and, where Elves know the answer, Men can only instinctively guess. Yet, they still seek light, even more so than the eldest Children of Ilúvatar, who chose to return to Middle-earth and turn their backs on Valinor. Thus, although Light encompasses all that is *good*, *beautiful*, and *true*, it can also blind, and those who bask in its glow unsatisfied may foster nefarious thoughts that pervert the feelings of joy and fulfilment that Light inspires. Evil darkness is not an equal partner to Light; it begins where there is an ill use of it. After the death of the Trees, the only 'pure' light left is in the Silmarils, which end up lost forever, one in the depths of the ocean, one in the earth, and one as a star in the sky. Ultimately, Light cannot be contained or kept selfishly for oneself; it is meant to shine for all. The greatest punishment, truly, is the tainting of Ilúvatar's light. As Lisa Coutras argues,

In corrupting the cosmic design of creation, evil and corruption become inevitable. […] After the first rising of the sun, "the breath of growth and mortality" fills all of Middle-earth. This suggests that creation is now in breach of its original design: it is now mortal and subject to decay. This theme of a damaged creation pervades the

legends and history of Arda, showing a world that rises to splendor only to pass away, falling further into decline with every age of the earth. (Coutras 2016, 58)

Although the Flame Imperishable is eternal, its radiances progressively lose their glow, until the only light possible–besides that of the Silmarils–is the poisoned light from the Trees used to the make the Sun and the Moon. With the entrance of Evil in Arda, Ilúvatar's creation is forever affected, and like the lights, the world dims, and becomes mortal. Consequently, in *The Silmarillion*, Light guides and fuels its characters, but burns and punishes them if they exploit it.

Although the dimming of the lights and the disappearance of Valinor from the eyes of the Children of Ilúvatar at the end of *The Silmarillion* are the consequences of the fall of Melkor, Elves, and Men, the story is nonetheless infused with a feeling of hope in the manner of the *eucatastrophe*, the 'good catastrophe', that Tolkien favoured; there is a certainty that, ultimately, good will triumph, and, even in a fallen, imperfect world, light still shines. This hope manifests in men such as: Beren, who found light in his love for the elven maiden Lúthien; and Ëarendil, who, in possession of a Silmaril, chose not to covet it, but to take it with him into Valinor with the intent to ask the Valar to forgive the Elves and Men of Middle-earth, and to aid them against Morgoth's armies. Thus, *The Silmarillion* seems to carry its own sort of light, and, like any good fairy-story, offers consolation to its reader by denying universal final defeat.

References

Bergen, Richard Angelo. 2017. "'A Warp of Horror'; J.R.R. Tolkien's Sub-creations of Evil." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 9 (1): 103-121. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss1/7.

Bulbul, Asli. 2022. *Light: The Diegetic World-builder in J.R.R. Tolkien's Secondary World.* MPhil(R) thesis, University of Glasgow. https://theses.gla.ac.uk/83198/.

Coutras, Lisa. 2016. *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eco, Umberto. (1959) 1986. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Hugh Bredin. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

——. 1988. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Translated by Hugh Bredin. Cambridge & Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Flieger, Verlyn. (1983) 2002. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language and Tolkien's World.* 2nd Edition. Kent & London: The Kent State University Press.

Halfwassen, Jens. 2014. "The Metaphysics of the One." In *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, edited by Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, 395-432. London & New York: Routledge. E-book.

Juričková, Martina. 2016. "The Myth of Creation in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion.*" Project, University of Constantinus the Philosopher in Nitra. PDF file. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.5058.3448.

Lauro, Reno E. 2008. "Of Spiders and (the Medieval Aesthetics of) Light: Hope and Action in the Horrors of Shelob's Lair." In *The Mirror Crack'd: Fear and Horror in Tolkien's Major Works*, edited by Lynn Forest-Hill, 53-79. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Ramsay, Jay. (1997) 2017. *Alchemy: The Art of Transformation*. United Kingdom: Bluewave Publishing. E-book.

Robbins, Susan. 2017. "The Biblical Symbol of Light in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*." In *Societal Studies* 9: 171-186. https://doi.org/10.13165/SMS-17-9-2-05.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1977) 2013. *The Silmarillion*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

——. (1983) 1997. "On Fairy Stories." In *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, 109-161. London: Harper Collins Publishers.